

Drinking in that Gulf Coast flavor

By Chris Sherman

tbt* correspondent

No industrial park has ever smelled as good to me as this: caramel, honey, cotton candy, butterscotch, even hints of coconut. Ultimately, it's pure vanilla.

It is the scent of Florida rum and the sugar-cane molasses and oak barrels that go into one of the area's finest and most successful artisanal spirits, Siesta Key Rum from Drum Circle Distilling in Sarasota.

The sweet, heady aroma of evaporating spirits is called the 'angel's share' in Cognac, Barbados, Porto, Jerez and Kentucky, wherever the finest alcohol is made.

The angels now can indulge right here. The scents are unmistakable and big enough to fill the 25-foot-high space and tall stainless-steel tanks plus the copper-pot still tanks to the left and a rack of barrels five rows high to the right. Mortals don't have to tour the plant, although hundreds do every weekend in season.

Troy Roberts' work is designed to capture those flavors in bottles of Siesta Key Rum: Silver, Gold and Spiced. And he has made enough to stock chain and independent liquor stores across Florida and 13 other states.

Pour a little in a glass, and you're hit with the same scents and tastes, more intense than in the warehouse, rich and smooth.

For me, the most stunning is the spiced rum, a category that often tastes gimmicky and artificial. Not Siesta Key's, which eschews liquid flavors and industrial syrups, insisting instead on natural honey and real cinnamon, coriander, anise and a handful of other spices. All told, it makes a sip that even Caribbean rum judges have named best in the world two years running.

Drum Circle Distilling feels nothing like a drum circle, a moonshiner's still or a Caribbean rum factory, although there's a cozy tasting room with a polished bar and a thatched roof in a corner of the warehouse.

This is the new face and taste of craft spirits in America, small-batch liquors made from ingredients that are natural and often local. Booze is the next subject of food entrepreneurs after craft beers, ciders and bitters. The labels of artisanal rum, whiskey, gin and vodka are abundant, with more than 400 small distillers cranking across the country and perhaps 15 in Florida.

Drum Circle's Roberts caught the wave early in 2007, and he was a natural for the new industry.

'I've been drinking rum since ... well, since when I shouldn't have been drinking rum,' he says. His previous businesses comprise a cocktail of a resume ranging from yogurt shops and pedicabs to websites for enthusiasts of Corvettes and other sports cars.

He spent the past seven years studying the business end of rum, finally sold his websites and released his first bottles of Siesta Key in 2010.

With the help of his girlfriend, Nanci Vatovec, and his handyman father, ex-pilot Jim 'Jumbo' Roberts, he built and hooked up a professional distillery that runs single batches every week rather than using the continuous distillation process of most massmarket rums. In each batch, Roberts carefully watches the boiling and then heating and condensing to separate the components and then blend them back or distill further.

Barrel aging holds the most fascination for Roberts, however. It is as complex as fermenting and distilling, yet takes

much longer. Each barrel adds unique flavors depending on its age, type of wood and previous contents; the attributes change with the movement of the barrels, heat and sun in the warehouse and the time in wood.

At Drum Circle, the barrels are stacked in the solera system used for





Sara Derrico, left, of Amsterdam, N.Y., watches as Michigan visitors Barbara Zelmer, Beth Vanden Heuvel and Phyllis Peters make a toast with Siesta Key Rum in the tasting room at Drum Circle Distilling in Sarasota.

Photos by Lara Cerri/tbt*



Siesta Key Rum's Troy Roberts: 'One of the tough parts of my jobs is I have to take samples.' His verdict? 'Yum.'

Florida in a bottle

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Siesta Key rums are priced between \$20 and \$30 at major retailers throughout Florida and are available in restaurants and bars. The distillery's tasting room is open from noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Saturday at 2212 Industrial Blvd., Sarasota. For a schedule of free tours and registration, see drumcircledistilling.com.

The grandpappy of Florida artisanal whiskey is **Palm Ridge Reserve**, born in an Umatilla barn near Ocala in 2009. Founders Marti and Dick Waters use barley wheat and two kinds of rye to make their whiskey and then age it in very small barrels of charred oak and orange wood. Their 90-proof Palm Ridge is a bourbon-style rum but is as distinctive as a single-malt Scotch. It costs approximately \$60. For sources, see palmridgereserve.com.

In a six-column copper still in Brandon, sugar cane makes vodka, not rum. **Florida Cane Vodka** distills fermented sugar cane with a riot of Florida fruits to make micro batches of 10 flavors, from Plant City strawberries to Ocala blueberries. Vodkas like Miami Mango are made to mix it up in crafty cocktails, yet their ripe flavor and slick texture is smooth enough to drink on the rocks. It costs approximately \$35. For locations and information on tours, see cane-vodka.com.

Michael Cotherman, a network engineer, has Pinellas County's first distillery under construction in Dunedin. When open later this year, his **Cotherman Distilling** will turn malted grain mash from local craft brewers into small-batch whiskey, gin and vodka. He will keep batches small and diverse, from palm berry vodka to barrel-aged single-malt whiskey. See cothermandistilling.com.

Homegrown spirits with a Florida kick run from Cape Coral's Wicked Dolphin rum and Alchemest rye whiskey in Miami to Fish Hawk red absinthe in Dunnellon. To keep up, see floridadistillers.com.

sherries, and each rum barrel is numbered and tracked over time. A favorite Roberts is watching most closely once held Jamaican rum, Scotch whisky and, lastly, an aged ale at Cigar City in Tampa. Once the rum is bottled, that barrel will go back to Cigar City to age more beer.

That aging takes time, and a young distillery has plenty of that ahead. Which doesn't mean huge profits for Roberts and his rum-loving partners, Tom Clarke and Ryan Adams. 'If it did, we could hire someone else to mop the floor.' For now, Roberts has given up sports cars for a kid-hauler SUV, and the family fleet is down to kayaks and an Optimist trainer for the boys.

But Roberts and Vatovec do have rum of their own and a place on Siesta Key to drink it. His favorite, which has not been released to the market, is from a barrel with several years of age and a punch of spice.

The distiller takes it simple, maybe neat, maybe on the rocks, with the sun going down of Siesta Key. And it is already true to its name, Distiller's Reserve.



Troy Roberts and girlfriend Nanci Vatovec pose atop barrels of aging Siesta Key Rum at the distillery. The first bottles of rum were released in 2010.

