

Arrack? What the f*@! is Arrack?

Oft-overlooked and very much misunderstood, arrack has played a key role in drinks history, say **Anistatia Miller** and **Jared Brown**





Arrack, arak, raki, arkhi. This should be confusing. These are not all the same spirit, and people have been getting them mixed up for as long as international travel has brought them to the attention of international travellers. Arak and raki are Middle Eastern, grape-based spirits that are flavoured with anise. Arkhi, from Mongolia, is distilled from koumis, fermented mare's milk that is frequently described as one of the least-pleasant beverages ever consumed for pleasure. And arrack was once a Hindi umbrella-term for all distilled spirits: one intrepid explorer wrote, in 1825, 'The natives call our gin, English arrack.'

But arrack is not all spirits. It is one very pleasant – and almost completely forgotten – liquor produced in India, Sri Lanka, Java, and the Philippines. Actually, it's a few spirits. Still confused?

Arrack predates all the new world spirits, it predates Scotch and Irish whiskey. It predates gin and genever. After Marco Polo commented on it in his 13th century travelogue *Il Milione*, it was

claim to the island in 1619. (The city was renamed Djakarta following the Japanese occupation in 1942).

Batavia arrack was immensely popular in early 18th century London. Considered superior to Caribbean rum, it was a higher-priced option for tavern-goers ordering punch. Punch came from India, brought to Britain, in the late 1500s, by sailors who were enamoured of its remarkable flavour. Punch's original base spirit was arrack.

A 1737 illustration of a satirically proposed monument to notorious Covent Garden coffee house owner Tom King featured casks of arrack and brandy, but no gin. Arrack was the drink of those who could afford better than the basics.

CEYLON ARRACK

When Britain took possession of what is now Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1802, arrack distillation was already long established both there and in Goa in southern India. Unlike Batavia arrack, Ceylon arrack was produced from 'toddy', fermented juice of the coconut palm, extracted by cutting the

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brought to Russia by Genoese merchants a century before the Russians' love of mead and beer was replaced with a taste for distilled spirits. In fact, it is the parent of vodka. Though its birth is lost in history, there is no doubt arrack is one of the oldest distilled spirits in the world.

BATAVIA ARRACK

A few styles of arrack are still produced today. Batavia arrack, hailing from the Indonesian island of Java, is made from molasses and water using dried cakes of red rice and various other botanicals containing yeast and other fungi spores as the starter for fermentation.

The fermented molasses mixture is then distilled in traditional pot stills. Batavia is the name the Dutch East India Company gave Java's capital when it laid

flowers from the tree and hanging a bucket below the cut to gather the free-flowing sap. No yeast is added. In fact, the sap has to be gathered in the mornings, so that the heat of the day sparks the airborne yeast into action. This turns the sap from slightly sweet milky water to toddy – palm wine – in a matter of hours.

Toddy production has changed little since Marco Polo first described it in *Il Milione*. 'Toddy tappers' climb to the tops of towering palm trees on sweeping plantations in Sri Lanka's 'toddy belt'. Here they cut the buds from the flower stems and lower full buckets of palm water to the ground before crossing by rope to the next tree. The toddy was once distilled strictly in pot stills, though column stills are now in use producing a much higher quality spirit. >>



TWO ARRACKS YOU CAN BUY IN THE UK

ROCKLAND CEYLON ARRACK

40% abv

Production: Coconut palm nectar, wild airborne yeast; column distilled

Colour: Deep golden, light amber

Nose: Vanilla, caramel, yuzu, tamarind, powdered sugar, light camphor in the finish.

Taste: Dry and refined, an herbaceous foretaste leads to touches of grapefruit peel and Brazil nut, then into a long rich, buttery finish with hints of

orange and toffee.

Conclusion: Complex and so unique as to deserve its own class. Pleasant with a bit of water or an ice cube, and assertive enough to mix well.

£25/70cl from Rockland Brands, 07813 855253

BATAVIA ARRACK VAN OOSTEN

50% abv

Production: Molasses, yeast and rice cake for fermentation; pot distilled

Colour: Clear

Nose: Nutty and oily, with a hint of camphor, faint allspice.

Taste: Lightly smoky, sharp, overwhelmingly herbaceous and slightly sour, distinct teakwood, full-bodied, with a long oily finish.

Conclusion: Reminiscent of rum, as it was made 150 years ago, it is as raw as the old techniques still used in its manufacture.

Unpleasant in straight consumption, it can be excellent with the right mixers.

£30.64/70cl from www.thewhiskyexchange.com

The best-known recipe using arrack is Swedish Punch. It has been around for a few centuries, as documented by Pehr Osbeck, Olof Torén and Carl Gustaf Ekeberg, in their 1771 book *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*:

‘To a quart of boiling water, half a pint of arrack is taken, to which one pound of sugar, and five or six lemons, or instead of them as many tamarinds as are necessary to give it the true acidity, are added: a nutmeg is likewise grated into it. The punch which is made for the men in our ship was heated with red hot iron balls which were thrown into it. Those who can afford it, make punch a usual drink after dinner.’

TAXES & WAR

So, what happened to arrack? First, taxation. By the early 1800s protectionist import taxes were levied against spirits imported from the east, giving an enormous advantage in Europe, then the world’s richest market, to Caribbean and American rum producers. The British East India Company went so far as to ban

transport of arrack on its ships except for consumption on board. Rum production grew exponentially, while arrack production gradually faded out.

Then during the Second World War, the Pacific theatre witnessed horrific battles, and most arrack production ceased as a result. In some cases, like in Goa, it disappeared completely. In Java, it nearly disappeared – exports were almost solely to China and Sweden – and it’s only in the last few years that it’s come streaming back into the world market.

It’s odd that Polynesia and the East Indies provided the inspiration for Trader

Most arrack production ceased as a result of World War II

Vic and Don the Beachcomber to launch the Tiki craze that swept through drinking culture from the 1940s through the 1960s (and thrives today in such great bars as London’s Mahiki and Trailer Happiness or Hula Tiki Lounge in Manchester).

Arrack comes around again

One London bar that has embraced the return of arrack is China Tang at The Dorchester hotel. Luca Cordiglieri has created four Ceylon arrack-based drinks: an aperitif style cocktail, a punch, a fruit-based short drink, and an after-dinner drink. ‘I liked that in all of them the character of the arrack was coming through, making it versatile and able to stand as a main spirit,’ says Cordiglieri.

Meanwhile, at the Connaught hotel, Erik Lorincz has created a superb Dutch East Indies Daisy using Batavia arrack. He found that the arrack complemented chocolate and so added crème de cacao to his creation. But this addition would not surprise anyone who produces fine chocolate. Though arrack disappeared from nearly all bar shelves ages ago, it can still be found in kitchens where it is traditionally used in dark chocolate.

ALEGRIA

By Erik Lorincz

Glass: Toddy

Method: Add two spoons of mix into a glass then add the remaining ingredients and stir. Serve hot.

35ml Ceylon Arrack (Mendis 7yo)

15ml Appleton Extra

10ml St Elizabeth Allspice dram liqueur

3drops Stoughton’s bitters

2tbsp Alegria mix*

150ml Darjeeling tea (hot)

*Alegria mix: rapadura sugar, butter, honey, pinch of sea salt. Caramelize the sugar; add the butter, honey and salt. Stir and pour into a clean jar. Store in a refrigerator.

Ironically those first tropical drinks that they experienced were far more likely made with arrack – Polynesian rum. Caribbean rum was simply an available substitute when the Tiki drinks were mixed in the United States. 🍹