

A Guide to the Best Sipping Rums Under \$50

Rum is one of the spirit world's most varied, and difficult-to-navigate, categories. Here, a crash course in affordable sipping rums, and the five bottlings under \$50 that topped our recent blind tasting.

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um is one of the world's most varied spirit categories and, like the realm of the pirates frequently evoked to sell the stuff, it's one in which the rule of law is weak and custom subject to the vagaries of opportunism. Some producers, like Richard Seale of Barbados' Foursquare Distillery, argue that this is a category error. After all, if we throw out the sub-categories of Scotch and bourbon and Canadian whisky (to say nothing of what they produce in India), whiskey, too, can look like an incredibly diverse category with few overarching rules and shared customs.

But the fact stands: the spirits that are made from sugarcane are made in a vast range of styles under sometimes conflicting and incongruous techniques in several dozen countries around the world. And yet, they are almost all considered, simply, "rum."

For some producers, the spirit is all about long, funky fermentations and flavorful pot-distillation. Others prize a light and elegant spirit made from column stills and wood aging. Some producers make their rum from molasses, while those in places with a French colonial heritage typically use fresh cane juice instead, which tends to give their rhum agricoles a powerful grassy note. Some producers finish off their rums by adding a dash or more of sugar to the bottle to create a sweetness that's come to be associated with many high-end rums, while others consider the practice to be sacrilege.

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A GUIDE TO THE BEST RYE WHISKEYS UNDER \$50

Today, the category of rye whiskey includes a broad range of expressions and styles. Here, a guide to rye, plus five affordable bottles to seek out.

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Regardless of style, rum has a clear center of origin in the Caribbean. It's no surprise, then, that the region excelled in a recent PUNCH blind tasting of 16 aged sipping rums under \$50. Four of the five were from the West Indies, and three of the five were from the two Anglophone countries at the center of production, Barbados and Jamaica, home to the already well-known distilleries of Mount Gay and Appleton, respectively (both of which offer excellent, well-aged sipping rums under \$50, a testament to the category's general affordability). The other was from Martinique in the French West Indies and made in the rum agricole style.

All of the rums we chose are indisputably bold—the esters from fermentation on full display. They aren't, however, monotonous. On one end, Foursquare's Zinfandel blend, a mix of pot- and column-distilled rums partly finished in a Zinfandel cask, was pure and balanced with seamless, creamy texture. On the other end, we were surprised to find that Smith & Cross made our list. A blend of heavy Jamaican pot still rums that's bottled at 57 percent alcohol, it is typically considered a rum better suited to cocktails than to sipping. But with a splash of water to lower the proof, Smith & Cross' intense fruity notes and long, evolving finish showed just how complex that rum can be.

The only non-Caribbean rum that made it into our top five was the Diplomatico Reserva from Venezuela. Sweeter and oakier than the others, it was a good entry into a rum style more typical of Spanish America.

In this tasting, we were looking for complex rums to be consumed neat, or with a splash of water. But we were also looking for rums that could take the drinker on a voyage through the possibilities of the spirit; what we ended up with runs the gamut, from moments of excitement pushing toward the precipice of exhaustion to a few of relaxing bliss. —*Bryce T. Bauer*

OUR TOP FIVE RUMS UNDER \$50

Foursquare Zinfandel Cask Blend

\$49

ABV:
43 percent

PURCHASE

The rum experts we polled for this tasting raved about the rums issued from the Foursquare Distillery in Barbados. This is a blend of 11-year-old column and pot still rums, some partially aged in Zinfandel casks (rum is typically aged in bourbon barrels, but finishing in casks that have held other wines and spirits is a trend currently being embraced by producers—something we also saw in our [recent tasting of ryes](#)). It stood out from the lot for being balanced, having clear sugarcane and wood notes and a nice mid-palate sweetness that we ultimately found made for a “bourbon-lover’s rum.”

Foursquare rums are also available, in other expressions, in the United States in some markets under the Doorly’s and Real McCoy brands.



Hamilton Jamaican Pot Still Gold Rum

\$26

ABV:
46.5 percent

PURCHASE

Jamaica has been renowned for centuries for its heavy and flavorful pot still rums. With an intense, ester-y nose and a super-long, complex finish, we found this example, which is imported by self-appointed Minister of Rum, Ed Hamilton, and produced at the Worthy Park distillery, to be an excellent showcase for why. While the petrol-y notes and wild intensity may not be for everybody, for drinkers in search of funk, this is your godsend.



Rhum J.M. V.S.O.P.

\$48

ABV:
43 percent

PURCHASE

This three-year-old rhum agricole from Martinique showed the green, petrichor (think, wet asphalt) notes typical of a rum from fresh sugarcane juice. While those notes might be polarizing for some drinkers, we were fascinated by its long, funky finish and textural tension. Rhum agricoles tend to be more expensive than molasses-based rums, and this one, coming in just under the mark, is a well-priced introduction to the genre.



Diplomatico Reserva Rum

\$25

ABV:
40 percent

PURCHASE

We found this Venezuelan rum very easy to like from the first sip. A blend of column and pot still rums aged up to eight years with well-integrated oak (a hallmark of rums produced in Spanish America), it was the sweetest rum in our top five. Still, it was far from a sugar bomb, and had just enough funk to keep it interesting.



Smith & Cross Jamaica Rum

\$28

ABV:
57 percent

PURCHASE

Though bottled by Hayman Distillers in London, this rum comes from the Hampden Distillery in Jamaica, a place that looks like it’s scarcely changed since the era of British colonialism—because it hasn’t. Hampden specializes in the long, funky fermentations that create powerful, ester-y rums. Bottled at 57 percent and made from some of Hampden’s more flavorful distillates, this a rum that is, declared one taster, “not for the faint of heart.” But it was certainly among the most complex in the tasting, showing distinct notes of cherry with a seemingly endless finish. (Note: Because of its higher proof, it does benefit from a splash of water.)

