

BOOZE

MAXIM

Rum Returns to Boston

September 22, 2014

By: Michael Easter

Privateer's swashbuckling approach to distilling: Take your time.



Photo Courtesy of Privateer Rum

Maggie Campbell is trying to make the perfect rum and it's a time-consuming process. Her slow distillation technique takes 25 times longer than that of her big-brand competitors. Campbell is fine with that. As the head distiller at [Privateer](#), an Ipswich, Massachusetts-based craft distillery, her goal is to bring back the complex stuff our founding fathers sipped while plotting against the Red Coats. If you've ever had a sip of Privateer's Silver Reserve or Amber rums, then you know she's damn close. But she's not quite there and she never will be. There is no "good enough" at Privateer.

If you think that all craft distillers sport this same obsessive, quality-first ethos, you're dead wrong.

The spirits world is a vicious ecosystem. There are massive brands that exclusively value the bottom line and consume smaller competitors in one bite and there's the craft spirits sector, which is itself populated by would-be predators, who talk about craft, but often have a money-first mentality. Many smaller brands even engage in a [semi-deceptive process](#) where they buy an alcohol made in mass quantity at a factory, bottle that alcohol, slap a fancy label on the bottle (with catch-phrases that appeal to locavores), and then sell it at a premium price. Privateer does not do this because it is antithetical to everything about the company.

Privateer was founded in 2011, by Andrew Cabot, the ancestor of an 18th century New England-based rum distiller and privateer. That family-connection gave the Privateer project gravitas, compelling Cabot to create a high-minded company that was about more than just capital. “We do everything the long and hard way,” says Campbell, “but that results in a better product, and we believe that producing a better product will always lead to more success.”

To make Privateer’s [Silver Reserve](#), Campbell hand-selects real cane juice crystals (from whichever of her “sugar people” are supplying the best at the time), real boiled brown sugar (not the dyed stuff you find at the supermarket), and proprietary blend of yeast. The [Amber rum](#) swaps grade-A molasses for the cane juice crystals.

“Rum is typically fermented at 110 degrees for 24 hours,” says Campbell. “That’s insane. That makes the yeast work harder and faster, and when yeast gets hot it becomes stressed out and it messes up the flavor of the spirit.”

That’s why Privateer ferments their rums for six days at 78 degrees, which allows intricate flavor profiles to develop. After a re-distillation, the silver rum is placed directly in stainless steel tanks to age for about two months, making the entire lifecycle about 2.5 months. Your average bottle of white rum’s lifecycle? Three days (slightly more if you count the time it takes to choke it down).

What happens to the amber rum is especially interesting—it goes from still to a variety of barrels, where it ages for two and a half years and picks up a terroir, a taste of the coastal New England land from whence it came. The distillery isn’t climate controlled, and it sits just a few miles from the Atlantic Ocean, so in the summer heat the barrels swell and soak up the rum and sea mist inherent in the coastal air, and in the winter cold the barrels contract and squeeze that rum and sea mist out. Flavors breathe in and out. “Our rum wouldn’t taste the same if we made it anywhere else,” says Campbell.

The problem is this: You can make a hell of a product, but that doesn’t always mean people will flock to it. “People have a stereotype of rum being an overly-sweet, college spirit—they don’t realize that when it’s made right, rum is dry, complex, and extremely versatile,” says VP of Sales Kevin Martin. He adds that it can be hard to convince people to pay a few more dollars per bottle, even if that money does go to better quality.

That's a problem faced by every small distillery who makes what they sell. Martin—who recently joined Privateer after being the bar manager of famed cocktail bar [Eastern Standard](#), in Boston—says that Privateer gets a lot of inspiration from distilleries like [Spirit Works Distillery](#), [Peach Street Distillers](#), [Sonoma County Distilling](#), [Sidetrack Distillery](#), [Leopold Brothers](#), and others who are doing things the right way. It's a brotherhood fighting back against mediocre liquor.

“At the end of the day, we're happy with what we do here,” says Martin. “We're not doing anything to deceive you, and we think you can taste the difference in our rum. Every time I sip Privateer I realize just how worth it putting all of the extra time, money, and energy into our product is.”