

Members Of The World's Biggest Rum Family Work To Preserve A Centuries-Old Competitor

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When Eduardo Bacardi describes the rum company he works for by saying, “There’re people who love it for so many different reasons; Some love the label or the history or the liquid or they know someone in the family,” he’s not talking about the rum you might expect. Though his name suggests a close association with the maker of the planet’s best-selling rum, he actually holds a top managerial position at a long-time Casa Bacardi competitor.

Rather than contributing his labor to the world’s largest family-owned spirits company, of which he’s the sixth generation of approximately 600 living family members, Bacardi serves as sales and marketing director for a relatively small-batch 139-year-old distillery just seven miles away from his birthright outside of San Juan, Puerto Rico -- a cherished brand about which all but a few spirits connoisseurs have ever heard: Ron del Barrilito.

“It’s a story waiting to be told,” says the man who’s tasked with telling that story. “When you see how people interact with it, it’s a love affair.”

Until two years ago, Barrilito belonged to the family Fernandez. But according to Bacardi, the fourth generation of owners of Edmundo B. Fernández, Inc. viewed their product as a passion project rather than a business that required active involvement. They carried out their great-grandfather’s traditional methods, a story that plays well in contemporary circles, but didn’t put

forth much effort to modernize, market or even sell. Despite continuing to hand-bottle and eschewing unnatural additives or preservatives or any coloring, they'd stopped distilling the liquid themselves, choosing to buy rum elsewhere (Casa Bacardi is the reported source) then add their own flavorings.

Somehow, despite being called a "cult" brand by the press and receiving between an 80- and 95-point rating from [Wine Enthusiast](#), on the intimate island, many younger drinkers remain unfamiliar. Bacardi says the well-meaning Fernandezes didn't keep track of the bottles their importer whisked away to the states and sold haphazardly at best.

"From what we know it was registered in less than ten states from the 1980s to now," he says. "You could find it for \$60 in Colorado and in the low \$30 range in Florida."

(Ed note: I can personally attest to the rum's allure and scattershot supply. My parents, who don't drink much alcohol, always stuffed bottles in their suitcases when we flew home from our annual Puerto Rico pilgrimage, and just last year my mom dragged me into a Brooklyn liquor store to see whether the shopkeeper carried it. To my surprise, he did.)

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Afraid to potentially watch Edmundo B. Fernández Inc. (which, as the oldest rum producer in Puerto Rico is only 18 years younger than Cuban-born Bacardi Ltd.) eventually wither away, Bacardi's father -- former Casa Bacardi facilities manager and passionate rum advocate Joaquin Bacardi -- partnered with two other Puerto Rican businessmen to buy and revive the brand. They promised to adhere to its original formulation and artisanal flavoring and blending methods and allow the Fernandez family to keep living on the centuries-old Hacienda Santa Ana alongside the handhewn production and aging facilities. Two Fernandez relatives still work there.

They brought in some new blood, including Eduardo Bacardi, set about making repairs and upgrades (including bringing in fresh oloroso sherry barrels to use for aging), and started writing plans to increase visibility, all while vowing to keep the company independent and niche.

"We don't want to become just another rum brand in a pina colada," Bacardi says.

Among the first orders of business: building a \$2 million visitor center where none had stood before. The center, which opened in late 2018, stands out as the sole contemporary building on the homestead and serves as the launching point for various tours of the timeworn working blendery. It tells the story of the company through photos, artifacts and history-loving guides; vends bottles and souvenirs; provides space for trade and public mixology lessons; and of course offers a bar where visitors can start their mornings with Hemingway daiquiris and the like.

Luckily, the plant lost very little to Hurricane Maria, and builders have salvaged much of the one main structure that fell by incorporating huge pieces of wood into the new center. Bacardi expects to welcome 20,000 guests this year.

“Expansion is definitely important but quality will always dictate,” he says.

In picking through their newly acquired inventory, the Bacardis and their partners discovered true liquid gold: American oak barrels put down to age since as far back as the 1950s. With their newly discovered treasure, they’ve introduced the first new products since the year Prohibition ended, adding to a lineup that until a few months ago consisted only of two labels identified as two-star (aged 3-5 years) and three-star (aged 6-10 years).

“We stepped into an aging facility that contains probably the largest collection of aged rum in the Caribbean,” Bacardi says. “These are really rare assets. If you don’t do something they’ll disappear (because of evaporation).” “These are really rare assets. If you don’t do something they’ll disappear (because of evaporation).”

Four-star consists of blended rums that’ve rested in barrels for up to 20 years (sold at limited retail accounts for an MSRP of \$300), while five-star, aged up to 35 years, sells exclusively out of the gift shop for \$750 per bottle.

“Holy s**t!” exclaimed my brother, Justin Nurin, when I told him about the find and the vintage liquid.

Obviously, he inherited an enthusiastic and sentimental proclivity for the brand from our father.

“Hopefully I’ll have more access to it and maybe the four and five, with the popularity of brown liquor these days, will make it as popular as I feel it should be,” he says.

(Ed. note: Because he literally begged me to bring some Barrilito home from my March visit to the hacienda, I gave him some three-star I’d lugged home in my own suitcase. The following night he texted me: “Just poured some *tres estrella* (three star) over ice! The brown sugar notes, yum!”)

Soon, Justin should be able to stop bugging me for such gifts. Currently, the Barrilito team is cautiously increasing distribution to metropolitan areas in 20 states, selectively choosing markets with strong cocktail cultures and a proven respect for the product. If the production team can increase quantity without sacrificing quality, they’ll push farther afield.

“We’re very receptive to fans of the brand,” he says. “There are (bars and restaurants) that have really been advocates of the brand, sending someone to Puerto Rico over the years and having them lug back four bottles at a time.”

However, he emphasizes a reality that speaks to his father’s interest in buying the hacienda as well as what it means to steward a revered family name.

He says, "Preserving the family's processes always comes first. Being Puerto Rican the Boricua blood flows thick."