

Text by Brian Schaefer
Photos by Kristopher Kelly

RUM AND REVOLUTION

Seeing Cuba through
Its Cocktails



To indulge in
rum in Cuba is
not to reduce
that complicated
place to a *sweet*
intoxicant.
Rather, *it is to*
partake in one
of the country's
cherished
traditions...

It was the hour of the daiquiri," Graham Greene wrote in *Our Man in Havana*, his 1958 satire of British intelligence in pre-revolution Cuba. The hour in question was well before noon; the daiquiri was how the novel's protagonist James Wormold, a vacuum salesman-cum-would-be-spy, began his days. One morning, a stranger offers him a whiskey. "I've just ordered a daiquiri," Wormold says, to which the stranger replies: "Can't take those. They relax me."

Shortly after landing in Havana this spring, my partner and I and two close friends dropped off our bags at a renovated colonial-style *casa particular*, a modest bed-and-breakfast, and walked a few blocks to the famed Hotel Nacional de Cuba for some of that relaxation. A brisk wind from Havana Bay whipped through the courtyard, where musicians, movie stars, and mobsters mingled after its 1930 opening, among them Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth, Meyer Lansky, and Lucky Luciano. A decade into the Prohibition Era, Havana had become the go-to watering hole for fun-loving Americans, which proved a boon to Cuba's rum industry.

Our daiquiris arrived in martini glasses. They were light, tart, and translucent, nothing like the syrupy red slushy that I downed as an 18-year-old on a family vacation in the Bahamas, the first alcoholic drink I ever bought for myself. Looking back, I think of that drink as candied training wheels for a life in liquor: College brought bitter kegs and cheap tequila, after which came microbrews and vodka-sodas, followed by wine and whiskey of increasing quality. I'd always associated rum with inexperience, frivolity, and tiki lounges. Cuba changed that.

The daiquiris at the Nacional were the first I had had in a dozen years, and the first of many over the next nine days. But we had not come to drink our way through Cuba. We were on a people-to-people tour spanning four cities and hundreds of miles, culminating in meetings with artists and LGBT activists in Havana. We were a multi-generational group of gay Americans from New York and Newark, Portland and Pittsburgh, confused and curious about our closest Communist neighbor. And we drank a lot. Daiquiris of various shades and strengths; mojitos with glittering mounds of sugar crystals sprouting forests of mint; Mary Pickfords, Cubatas, Mulatas, and other indigenous libations. There was beer, too—Cristal and Bucanero are the local options—but rum is the country's proudest and most prominent renewable resource. By the end of the trip, one member was pouring shots into his morning coffee.

I know this sounds decadent and superficial, an Atlantis cruise on land. But to indulge in rum in Cuba is not to reduce that complicated place to a sweet intoxicant. Rather, it is to partake in one of the country's cherished traditions, its tumultuous history—from colonial times to independence to revolution and modern reforms—and its unique spirit.

Christopher Columbus brought sugarcane to Cuba on his second voyage across the Atlantic, in 1493, introducing what would become one of the country's staple crops and a piston in the engine of its economy. Extracting sugar from the plant created leftover juices and molasses, which 16th-century Spanish settlers distilled into tafia, a low-grade cousin of rum. Technological innovations in the 19th century yielded increased sugar crops and better distillation techniques, which an immigrant from Catalan

When they lifted
their glasses to
toast, someone
proclaimed
¡Por Cuba Libre!
in honor of their
host country's
new freedom. A
modern cocktail
was born.

named Don Facundo Bacardi perfected, eventually establishing a rum company in his family's name in 1862 in the southern city of Santiago de Cuba.

Until that point, rum had been heavy and harsh, more an aguardiente than a sippable tippie. Bacardi's innovation was to use the charcoal filtering favored by vodka distillers, plus years of careful trial and error, to get the formula just right. The result was a smooth, clear spirit—a premium white rum. Bacardi also had an eye for advertising, adopting the memorable image of a bat for its logo. According to journalist Tom Gjelton, in his book *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba*, early Bacardi batches were sold in recycled olive oil containers featuring that creature. The mascot stuck, still found on any bottle of Bacardi rum at your corner liquor store, as well as stamped in brass on the doorknobs of the Bacardi Building in Old Havana, an Art Deco masterpiece from 1930.

In 1868, not long after Bacardi's founding, Cuba rose up against Spain, its colonial occupier for the previous 400 years. The Ten Years' War, as it was called, ended in Cuban defeat, as did a subsequent effort, known as The Little War. The third part of the trilogy, the Cuban War of Independence, spanned 1895–98 and finally earned Cuba its autonomy. We know that conflict as The Spanish–American War, which sent future president Teddy Roosevelt to Cuba as a Rough Rider and rewarded the United States with significant political and economic influence over the island, giving Cuban independence a big stars-and-stripes asterisk.

Americans were also responsible for a now-ubiquitous Cuban beverage. In 1900, in the aftermath of victory, off-duty soldiers from the U.S. Signal Corps were schmoozing in a Havana bar. One of them boldly ordered a Bacardi rum and a new import called Coca-Cola, with a wedge of lime. The successful combo was then ordered by the whole gang. When they lifted their glasses to toast, someone proclaimed *¡Por Cuba Libre!* in honor of their host country's new freedom. A modern cocktail was born.

The most memorable Cuba Libre I had was in a small restaurant off the Prado, or main boulevard, in Cienfuegos, a port city that bears the elegant architectural markings of the French merchants who settled there in the early 19th century. When it was placed in front of me, I mistook it for iced tea. It had a sharp tang and I saw that it was composed of equal parts lemon juice and cola, giving it an unexpected but not unpleasant bitter-sweetness.

It's a taste I now associate with that town, a charming place exhibiting all the competing narratives of contemporary Cuba, which look something like this: A gorgeously renovated colonial hotel, near a local provision store which may or may not carry eggs that week, near a bank with a line stretching down the street, near a perfectly manicured European-style square with a grand bandstand, which is surrounded by old movie theaters and fancy residences, beyond which lie neighborhoods in utter decay. It's a mosaic repeated in every city we visited, and somehow it all mixes, bittersweetly.

Other stops on our itinerary are now linked in memory to specific drinks, like the *canchánchara*, the official beverage of Trinidad, a colonial town founded in 1512 with cobblestone streets and bright pastel walls.





Trinidad lies near Valle de Los Ingenios, one of Cuba's largest sugar-producing regions where enslaved Africans harvested stalks of white gold (slavery was abolished in Cuba in 1886). Canchánchara appeared during the Ten Years' War; it features the same ingredients as a daiquiri—rum, lime juice, sugar—but with honey mixed in, giving it a richer texture and sweeter sting. At night in the town square, serenaded by live music, you can order one in a little plastic cup from window counters that look like bank tellers for about \$3 each.

Meanwhile, in Viñales, a small, bustling tourist town on the edge of a national park that was scouted as a possible setting for *Jurassic Park*, the standout cocktail was the Anti-Stress, found only at Casa de Confianza, a beautiful hillside organic farm and restaurant. Adapted from an old family recipe, the Anti-Stress takes a piña colada base—pineapple, coconut, rum—and adds a five-herb blend of anise, lemongrass, basil, peppermint, and Yerba Buena, a plant also in the mint family (all grown onsite). The result is a celadon-colored concoction with a hint of mellow earthiness; among our group, it was the most popular cocktail in Cuba.

The Anti-Stress was indeed a moment of respite from a bustling village that illustrates the rapid changes underway in a Cuba newly open to Americans. Nearly every private home with a room to spare in Viñales has rebranded itself a casa particular, offering residents an important source of income. There's a scent of possibility and enterprise in the air, but it's mixed with unbearable exhaust from a constant stream of half-century-old cars and the nonstop commotion of traffic jams. Viñales' main drag is crowded with bars, restaurants, and English, a development of the past few years. Some establishments have imported American standards of service, others have not. Some splurge on incandescent bulbs that give off the attractive



yellow glow we're used to; most adhere to cheaper fluorescent ones, casting lovely patios in grim glares. In some ways, this feels representative of Cuba as a whole—a place with staggering potential sometimes caught in unflattering, unwelcoming light.

Another pocket of calm we visited was Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm), a sprawling compound twenty minutes from Old Havana where Ernest Hemingway lived for more than twenty years and swam nude in the palm-shaded pool. In Havana, monuments to his prodigious thirst abound, notably at the Floridita Bar, dating to 1817, across the street from the majestic and still-under-construction capital building. It was at the Floridita, in 1930, that the frozen daiquiri was invented by a clever bartender who took the primary ingredients, added tiny ice chips, and gave them a good rattle in the cocktail shaker. Hemingway was a fan. "This frozen daiquiri," he wrote in *Islands in the Stream*, his posthumous novel published in 1970, "so well beaten as it is, looks like the sea where the wave falls away from the bow of a ship when she is doing thirty knots."

Hemingway took his with double rum, hold the sugar. Today, after fighting swarms of tourists, you too can order a Papa Doble, a nod to Hemingway's nickname, at the Floridita. Across town, down an alley from a vast cathedral sits a dive called La Bodeguita del Medio, where Hemingway was also a regular, along with other notables like Errol Flynn, Pablo Neruda, and one Ché Guevara. The American writer alternated between the two joints for variety. A handwritten note, supposedly by Hemingway, hangs in La Bodeguita: "My mojito in La Bodeguita, My daiquiri in El Floridita." The literary associations of these cocktails situates them conveniently in the first half of the 20th century, a period of relatively amiable relations between us and them, before Fidel Castro took over in 1959, before the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, before the 1962 missile crisis. Of course, such



To visit Cuba
as an *American*
today is to face,
clear-headed, our
own culpability
in stunting the
young country's
progress by
aggressively
pursuing our
own economic
interests.

romanticizing makes history hazy, as if studied after a round of Papa Dobles.

To visit Cuba as an American today is to face, clear-headed, our own culpability in stunting the young country's progress by aggressively pursuing our own economic interests, by supporting corrupt politicians, like the dictator Fulgencio Batista, who Castro ousted in his revolution, by subsequently driving the small island into the Communist arms of Russia, by stubbornly keeping our feud alive decades after moving on from much heavier and more costly conflicts, like Vietnam.

At the Giron Museum, a small exhibition space situated at the site of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cubans celebrate the accomplishments of the revolution—its successful campaigns to bring literacy and healthcare to the entire country—while bemoaning American interference. From their perspective, Castro and his comrades were simply trying to drain the swamps of Cuban elites—the wealthy sugar families and corrupt mob-influenced politicians who fled to Miami—and make Cuba great again. In exchange, though, they swapped one dictator for another, traded free elections for one-party rule and made an economic deal with the devil that has suffocated growth.

Sinatra and Hemingway's daiquiris and mojitos were likely made with Bacardi rum, then the national brand. Today, you can't find reference to Bacardi anywhere on the island, aside from its former headquarters in Havana.

Bacardi, a multi-generational family-owned progressive and patriotic business, was initially cautiously supportive of Castro's movement until he nationalized the company in 1960. Clever business maneuverings allowed them to reinvent themselves abroad, setting up shop in Puerto Rico and becoming an international liquor conglomerate. In the decades since the revolution, family members in Miami have funded anti-Castro efforts, lobbied Congress to recognize its rights over confiscated property, and spent millions in court fighting the Cuban government. Meanwhile Havana Club is the new national brand, and the ongoing battle between the rum giants illustrates the country's continuing internal conflicts.

When the Castro era ends, which it will in 2018 when Raúl Castro steps down as leader, a new chapter will begin. We don't know the direction, but we know what Cubans will be drinking. Rum flows directly through Cuba's messy modern history, reflecting the country's appeal and its perils. It is neither as carefree as the vintage 1957 Chevrolets that prowl Havana's seaside promenade suggest, nor as draconian and desperate as the impression given by American high school text books. Billboards salute Ché and rail against the embargo, while Cubans wear tank tops in the pattern of American flags and enthusiastically welcome their "frenemies" to the north, as one called us. Cuba proudly wears its contradictions on its guayabera sleeves.

On the day of our arrival, after our welcome cocktails in the courtyard of the Hotel Nacional, we met our trip leader, who advised: "Enjoy Cuba, but don't try to understand Cuba." That proved wise. After more than a week there, I understood Cuba less than before I had visited. Reflecting now on the experience, I find myself relating again to Graham Greene's protagonist: "Wormold drank his daiquiri too fast and left the Havana Club with his eyes aching." ///



CUBA LIBRE

Squeeze the juice of **1 lime** into a Collins glass and toss in one of the spent halves. Cover with plenty of ice, then pour in **2 ounces dark rum**.

Top with **Coke** (Mexican Coke if you can find it) and stir once to combine.



CLASSIC DAIQUIRI

Fill a martini glass with ice water and let stand til it's frosty. Put **2 ounces white rum**, **¾ ounces lime juice**, and **¾ ounces simple syrup** (equal parts sugar and water combined) in a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Shake vigorously to chill, then strain into the chilled (and emptied of ice water) martini glass.



CANCHÁNCHARA

Stir together **1-½ ounces white rum**, **½ ounce fresh lime juice**, and **¾ ounces honey syrup** (equal parts honey and water combined). Scoop in plenty of crushed ice, stir to chill, and top with **a splash of soda water** if desired. Garnish with a **lime wedge**.

