

A Sri Lankan Toast to Bacchus

Posted on

Derrick Shokman raises his glass in praise of Arrack



Arrack or Old Stuff as it is fondly referred to by tipplers here, is a truly indigenous liquor with a history almost as old as Sri Lanka itself.

Arrack is much older than Scotch whisky. The first written record of whisky in Scotland was in 1494. By that time Britain was already importing arrack as huraca from Genoese merchants.

We know that Portuguese, Dutch and English soldiers stationed in this country during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries drank plenty of arrack. They were particularly partial to a punch called mussack which they prepared from arrack, eggs, jaggery (coarse brown candy) and nutmeg.

Heydt, a German in the Dutch army in 1746, gives us a delightful account of an elephant under the influence. The presented to the Dutch ambassador by the king of Kandy. Much to the elephant's annoyance, he was put aboard a ship at Galle to be taken to Batavia in Indonesia.

The elephant showed his displeasure by smashing a keg of arrack in the hold. He then proceeded to get uproariously drunk, and washed himself with the remaining spirit while his keeper attempted to catch in a bucket whatever dripped off his flanks.

Arrack is prepared from toddy, which is the sap of the coconut flower. When you travel the coast road from Colombo to the south, you will notice that from the town of Panadura onward, most of the palms do not have any nuts. The nuts have been sacrificed for the toddy.

The flowers are tied to prevent them opening out, and they are bent over clay pots hung beneath elephant head. If you are lucky you might even be treated to the

sight of tipsy fruit bats weaving their drunken way homeward after a night out on the palms, having sampled the toddy dripping into the pots.

Toddy from the pots is collected in barrels and trundled along the road to the collection centres. From there the barrels are taken by truck or bullock cart to the distilleries. Pot and patent stills are used for the distillation of toddy into arrack in the same way as fermented grape wine is distilled into cognac.

The first running, or foreshot, is not taken for making arrack. nor is the last running or tailing. Both of these are mixed with fresh toddy and re-distilled. Only the middle running or clear spirit is used for making arrack. The distillate from the clear spirit is treated with various substances to give each brand of arrack its distinctive taste.

A good quality arrack is produced from a 100 percent toddy base. It is distilled, refined and matured in wooden vats. Unfortunately, only about 20 percent of the arrack produced locally has an all toddy base. The demand is so great that the balance is supplied in the form of blended arrack.

A blended arrack is a mixture of alcohol made from coconut toddy and neutral alcohol manufactured from the molasses of the local sugar industry, or imported alcohol.

The State Distilleries Corporation is the biggest supplier producing pure coconut arrack as Double Distilled Very Special Old Arrack (known as VSOA) Old Arrack and Coconut Arrack (known as Pol). Gal Arrack is a blend of coconut arrack and neutral spirits of potable alcohol.

W.M. Mendis and Co Ltd, the largest of the private distilleries, provides pure coconut arrack as "Mendis Special," "Mendis Extra Special (Double Distilled)" and "Mendis Old Arrack." These are more flavoured than the Corporation arracks. The cheaper "Gold Label" is blended arrack.

Three popular brands produced by Gilbeys (Lanka) Ltd are "Old Reserve," "White Diamond" and "V and A". The first is a pure coconut arrack while the other two are a blend of neutral spirits with an added concentrate of the desired flavour. (If the label spells arrack as arrak then it is not true arrack, in the manner that Scotch whisky is not Scotch if it is spelt whiskey. -Ed.)

Arrack tipplers may be broadly grouped into two categories. There are those who

look down on the blended arrack, and others who do not disparage the blends so long as they conform to the standards of the British Pharmacopoeia.

The latter group maintains that as neutral spirits are not objected to in the manufacture of internationally popular alcoholic drinks like Gin and Vodka, it does not matter if they are used in blended arracks.

What really matters is what appeals to you in the way of prices, flavour, aroma and bouquet (if any). The best way to find out is to sample the spirit, sipping it slowly either neat or on the rocks. If you consider the straight spirit a little rough, you may dilute it with water, soda, tonic, ginger ale or any other carbonated drink. Arrack and cola is popular with the younger set.

Personally I do not think that there is a more satisfying chaser than the water of the orange-coloured King Coconut (thambili) which is readily available throughout the year on sale on pavements and in roadside shops.

Buy a couple and take them along to your room. The seller will trim the tops of the fruits for you, so that you can easily punch a hole in them when you are ready to pour out the naturally protected, 100 percent germ-free liquid.

Arrack and thambili! It is a typically worthy Sri Lankan toast to Bacchus. Cheers!

Further reading: W.M. Mendis has written the story of Mendis Special in an entertaining book about arrack and other drinks called Confessions of an Entrepreneur. It was published in 1988 by W.M. Mendis & Co Ltd, 193, Kirula road, Colombo 5, Sri Lanka, at Rs140 and can be obtained through Colombo bookshops.



Barrels are trundled along to the collection centres.