

Rums Rising Star - A Century in the Making

Ron Abuelo

By Sean Ludford

Recently I was given the great opportunity to visit Ron Abuelo, Panama's top Rum producer. I was somewhat familiar with their great Rums having tasted them on several occasions including reviews found here at BevX.com. I was, however, greatly unaware of the brand's story and woefully ignorant of the nation of Panama. I am very pleased to inform that I have resolved both issues.

The American dream is alive and well, it just so happens to be residing in Panama. Panama is a bustling and thriving nation growing at a reported rate of 8% annually. While much of the world is wondering if they should buy or sell (and sell to whom?), Panama is buying. It's an impressive sight and a fact that Panamanians are quick to point out. There is an affirmative buzz in the warm tropical air that is nearly tangible.

While it may seem like a gratuitous deviation from the focal point of Rum-soaked adventures to talk in glorious terms about Panama's charming and incontrovertible swagger, it's not. Panama's strut can be seen up close in a micro version at Ron Abuelo. This "little" Rum brand is not content to stay little for long. They are well on their way to achieving goals that can be modestly described as ambitious. These guys are far from simply being wide-eyed and idealistic and in the words of the baseball great Dizzy Dean, "It ain't braggin' if you can do it."

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In order to achieve their grand plan of world domination Varela Hermanos, the creators and producers of Ron Abuelo, made it a priority to shore-up the home market. Nearly a decade ago they purchased the Bacardi distribution and bottling operation and network in Panama City (For many years Ron Abuelo was distilling and aging Rum for Bacardi). This included a number of global Wine and Spirits brands giving them vital access to the nation's retail and bar/restaurant outlets. This acquisition made it possible, in part, for sales to go from 2,600 cases to 500,000 cases in just eight years.

To keep pace with demand they are increasing supply. They have not yet reached their maximum output and they are increasing their Rum aging warehouses by 25% this year and 25% more again in 2012. By 2014, the year that the massive canal expansion will be completed, they expect be selling one million cases of Spirits worldwide. That is

Left to Right

The Ron Abuelo family of Rums: 7 years-old, 12 years-old, and their very mixable Añejo.

A look at the swank and modern skyline of Panama City.



certainly the big leagues. Typically a brand enjoying rapid growth as witnessed with Ron Abuelo would raise an eyebrow or two among the quality minded consumer and writer. No such concerns are valid regarding Ron Abuelo, as they possess a cache of mature Rums that are the envy of their peers.

Presently, Varela Hermanos control roughly 90% of Panama's Spirits market. Seco, Panama's national Spirit, is their most important domestic product. Seco, a creation of Varela Hermanos, is a clear and fairly neutral Spirit made from pure sugar cane juice that is fermented and then distilled and bottled at 35% ABV (70 proof). There are several brands of Seco sold in Panama but the best selling label by far is their ubiquitous brand, Seco Herrerrano. Seco is typically used with mixers in place of Vodka or Rum and is also traditionally mixed with milk. (Yes, I find this an odd concoction as well.)

Exports are Varela Hermanos' next frontier. Presently Chile and Bolivia are their biggest export markets with Europe growing rapidly. However the big trophy is the US. Despite the incredible difficulty of establishing and growing a brand in the United States, the Varela Hermanos team will ultimately measure their success on their ability to build a respectable following in the US.

I arrived in Panama City late the in evening. The drive in to town from the airport did little to acquaint me with the topography as the landscape was obscured by darkness. When morning broke, the window of my hotel room offered a sliver of the cityscape. Sleek, shiny, and ultra modern buildings stand tall and confident projecting an image of imagination and commerce. Little did I know that I would soon have a bird's-eye view of Panama's capital city and verdant countryside. At the edge of the city a helicopter was readied for our group's journey to the distillery.

This would be my first serious helicopter ride (a quick up and down years ago was a poor substitute for the real thing). While I am no stranger to air travel, this mode of air transport was a bit more raw than my typical trip. The chopper affords no reclining seats, no in-flight movie or flight attendant to fetch a drink if the skies grew choppy.

As we lifted from the tarmac I watched the ground slip away meter by meter. A colleague spoke up and stated that the trick was not to look down until we reached our cruising altitude. This was a

clever bit of information to possess and all the more clever had it been delivered while we were solidly on terra firma. Regardless, we all kept possession of our breakfast and once we reached the desired altitude we headed SW to our destination.

The 45-minute trip carried us over beautiful rolling hills of green and stone, gorgeous coastlines adorned with shiny new homes and resorts. At one point our pilot pointed to an estate on a hilltop with a perfectly manicured baseball diamond. "There is the home of Mariano Rivera," he quipped. I must say that once I became accustomed to the movements and vibrations I found the ride to be thrilling and a super way to take in the scenery.



Arriving above the distillery we took a quick fly over the estate before touching down in a small field flanked by mango trees just adjacent to the aging warehouses. The grounds are beautiful, well-groomed and seamlessly integrated into the lush green surroundings about 15 miles from the coast near the town of Pesé.

The aging warehouses are common in design with sturdy brick and plaster topped with wooden rafters supporting a tin roof. They are open to the ambient air as is also common practice in the Caribbean. The walls are covered with the telltale black fungus (*baudouinia compniacensis*) that can be found clinging to the exterior of virtually every Spirits aging edifice the world over. The air is thick with the scents of local plants, flowering trees, and the sweet decadent aromas of maturing Rum.

A modern tasting and meeting facility stands out among the older structures. Here they are well-equipped to entertain visiting Rum enthusiasts. There are plans to build additional visitor oriented structures in the near future. Despite being nearly a



To the left we offer a peak in to the aging warehouses for Ron Abuelo.

Below is one of the many fields of cane controlled by Varela Hermanos.



four-hour drive from Panama City, in the heart of a predominantly agrarian community they are beyond optimistic that visitors will beat a path to their door; they expect it. The Panamanian spirit is more intoxicating than the Rum.

Ron Abuelo is naturally self-sufficient enacting “green” processes with little fanfare doing it simply because it makes sense. The shredded cane material, once giving up its sweet juices, is compacted and bundled and used as fuel to fire the boilers and stills – a bright and efficient innovation.

Varela Hermanos chooses to cut and harvest all of its cane by hand employing 500 local citizens to perform the task. They never burn the fields prior to harvest, which is a common practice by most sugar growers and processors. The fires burn away the tops of the cane and the long leaves that sprout from the stalk. It would be more time efficient to harvest their nearly 2,000 acres of sugarcane by machine but this is not even a consideration as it would so negatively impact local families.

Ron Abuelo’s secret weapon is their incredible stock of mature Rum. Varela Hermanos has been distilling since 1936 and for decades Ron Abuelo has provided quality aged Rums for a wide range of well-respected international Rum brands. Today the focus is finally on selling these great mature Rums under the Ron Abuelo flag.

Further, they control their entire operation and therefore their destiny. They grow their own sugarcane on land that they own. They distill their own Spirit and they age it all at their estate. Their Rums are a true “single estate” product with every detail managed by Varela Hermanos.

The Rums are created by carefully blending two styles of Rum produced at the distillery. The first is a light and clean Rum, distilled to a higher proof, while the second, distilled to a lower proof, base Rum is extremely aromatic with bold, wild, and exotic flavors to match. By marrying these two Rums, Ron Abuelo is able to create Rum that has both depth and drinkability.

The 12 year-old is an intriguing diversion in style. It is certainly a sibling of the first two Rums but the 12 offers a level of intensity of both flavors and aromatics akin to ultra-premium Bourbons with a silky texture to match. This is a serious brown Spirit and at about \$33 a bottle in the US, a super value.

The Ron Abuelo portfolio comprises four aged Rums: Añejo, 7 year-old, 12 year-old, and Centuria their latest addition, a 30 year-old Rum that is and always will be their highest mark. Centuria was introduced in Panama in 2008 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the family estate. It is a bit pricey, as you would imagine, and precious few bottles reach the US. It's a delectable statement of intent from Ron Abuelo.

The Ron Abuelo Añejo is their first tier Rum and a perfect introduction to the house style. It is complex and dry with notes of dried fruits, toasted coconut, brown sugar, sandalwood, and brown baking spices. It's super to sip straight over ice and it is a smart choice for fresh Rum cocktails. The 7 year-old exhibits many of the same attributes found

in the Añejo with greater depth and even more layers of fruit, spice, and wood. It is terrific in cocktails but I prefer to sip it straight. The only issue with this Rum is that it goes down a bit too easy. The 12 year-old is an intriguing diversion in style. It is certainly a sibling of the first two Rums but the 12 offers a level of intensity of both flavors and aromatics akin to ultra-premium Bourbons with a silky texture to match. This is a serious brown Spirit and at about \$33 a bottle in the US, a super value.

Of course this line-up of Rum is likely to grow in the coming years. Don't be surprised to see some creative additions. The Varela Hermanos team is presenting their Rums as premium brown Spirits aimed to please traditional Bourbon and Whisky drinkers. They don't appear to be bound by traditional Rum marketing concerns – a clever and refreshing point of view in my opinion. They are building the brand based on a simple axiom, quality. Quality knows no boundaries or limits. Quality and Panama grown self-assurance is a powerful mixture. Look out world...

Left to Right
 The exterior of the new tasting/meeting room.
 A perfect setting of Rums from Ron Abuelo to be tasted.

