

# GO YOUR OWN WAY

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Discover an English distillery that is thinking outside the box in its rum production

Among the verdant hills of Derbyshire, England, a quiet craft distilling revolution is taking place. The company behind it, White Peak Distillery, turned heads with the release of its inaugural whisky earlier this year – but it has also been making waves, and history, in rum.

Since Old Salt Rum was launched by the Essex-based English Spirits Company a decade ago, several other English distilleries have dipped their toe in the sugarcane spirits pool, from East London Liquor Co. and Scratch Spirits to carbon-negative distillery Two Drifters. White Peak joined this crowd in 2020 when it launched its unaged white rum, but through the methods used to make it, the distillery is breaking new ground for English-made rums.

When Max Vaughan and wife Claire founded White Peak in 2016 – Derbyshire’s first craft distillery – neither had any experience in distilling, and Max concedes there were “a number of leaps of faith”. However, the couple knew from the outset that they wanted to make spirits that celebrated their home county, and to keep an “open door” for anyone who should want to come and visit. “We are trying to appeal to people who care about how [spirits] are made,” Max says.

Following a significant renovation project at its site (the Wire Works in Ambergate), the first liquid came off White Peak’s stills in 2018, with new-make spirit going into barrels and its Shining Cliff gins being bottled for sale. The distillery is currently producing five batches of new make a week, with a total annual production of around 58,000 lpa (litres per annum).





While whisky was always destined to be the distillery's focus – its lightly peated Wire Works Whisky, named in homage to its home, was released earlier this year to much fanfare – the team kept an open mind about experimenting with other spirits.

“Rum became a natural extension... when we thought about things we were also focused on in whisky making – fermentation, yeast, et cetera,” explains Max. “It was important for us to be doing everything here on-site, as we do with our whisky, and not to add flavours or modify other people’s liquid. Having that authenticity as much as we could was very important.”

With the goal of Derbyshire-made rum fixed, the team began exploring options for raw materials. While most distilleries making rum away from sugarcane-growing regions opt for molasses – a by-product of sugar production that can easily be preserved and transported – Max was keen to explore other options. This led him to South American panela (a.k.a. rapadura):

unrefined cane sugar produced through the boiling and evaporation of sugarcane juice. Unlike the fresh juice – but similarly to molasses – panela travels well.

While there is some debate over whether spirits produced with panela legally qualify as rum, this technicality is not concerning the White Peak team. Max says, “At the moment, we are confident that we are producing a good-quality spirit that, as far as we are concerned, is rum. If we have to defend it, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

After experimenting with sugar washes using different proportions of panela and molasses, Max settled on a 50/50 split. Fermentations last several days and, unusually for a UK rum distillery, White Peak

uses its own dunder – leftover material from each rum distillation, which is added to the next fermentation to aid flavour development. Max explains, “We have a proxy for a traditional dunder pit and every single rum fermentation we do uses some of our own dunder. As the dunder reserve builds up, we are getting a richer spirit. A lot of the dunder is refreshed on a fairly regular basis.”

White Peak’s rum (it doesn’t currently have a brand name) is copper pot-distilled in four-month campaigns; this strategy is necessary to fit around its whisky production, as the two processes use some of the same fermentation and distilling equipment. The most recent rum campaign started in November 2021 and finished in late March.

Max explains, “We have one fermentation vessel that we can dedicate for rum, and when



shaved, toasted and re-charred (STR) casks that he originally purchased for maturing whisky. He says, “STR gives a richer colour [and] I think we do end up with a slightly smoother rum ... Potentially the STRs could make the spirit a bit too woody, but they have the ability to clean up some of the slightly off notes.”

As well as pleasing fans of White Peak Distillery spirits, the process of developing their own rum has also been beneficial for the distillery team. Max believes that working with a new type of spirit, with different production requirements, has improved their overall knowledge of spirit production, particularly with regard to the important role that fermentation plays in flavour development. “That has strengthened our resolve in our whisky making,” he says.

“People on the distillery tours tend to be people who appreciate good spirits. They get to try our rum and sip it, much as it was designed to be enjoyed ... Some of them have not been used to drinking brown spirits like rum neat. We bottle our rum at 45% and with some people, we do get the sense that they have not spent much time with neat spirits in that strength bracket, so that has opened their eyes as well.”

In producing its rums (which may have a brand name one day, Max muses), White Peak Distillery has remained true to its vision of producing spirits and flavours in an “authentic way”, while celebrating the craft of distilling. Spirits commentators and enthusiasts may not have anticipated the release of rum made in Derbyshire, but White Peak’s conscientious approach to distillation and maturation indicates that it is certainly a rum worth trying. *R*

we are doing two-week fermentations, we can do two batches a month – but we are looking at ways that we may be able to do more.

“We started with a 36-hour fermentation, and we were underwhelmed with the end result. But we started asking around and discovered that rum needs a longer fermentation to develop the funkier notes.”

The final rum is dry, with no sugar added post-distillation, and is bottled at 45% ABV. An unaged rum was released first, followed by some aged spirit. White Peak has since filled some of those ex-rum casks with its whisky; while rum cask-finished whisky is not novel, Max says he is unaware of any other distilleries using rum casks to finish their whisky where the distillery has also made the rum.

Due to its current distillation schedule, the stock of White Peak rum is limited, with around 35 casks currently maturing. The majority has been filled into ex-bourbon casks, but Max has also utilised some



From left: The White Peak team; White Peak’s cask-aged rum; In the warehouse; Claire and Max Vaughan