

# NORTHERN TROPICS

TWO MICHIGAN COMPANIES TEAM UP TO LEGALLY DELIVER A UNIQUE SMALL-BATCH JAMAICAN RUM

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING

*Not all food and drink pairings happen at a table. In this ongoing series, we explore how the collaborative efforts of an artisan food producer and a craft distillery can not only yield unique, remarkable products, but also bring passionate, creative minds together for the purpose of producing something special. In this issue, we explore how a craft distillery and a groundbreaking food ingredient company in Michigan got together to produce a unique Jamaican rum.*

The year is 2019, and BLiS Gourmet has a problem to solve. It's not a make-or-break problem; The Grand Rapids, Michigan food company has plenty of recognition for their award-winning specialty ingredients and barrel-aged sauces and liquids of varying viscosity. They also have a superfan in Grant Achatz, culinary mastermind of Chicago's Michelin three-star restaurant Alinea, who annually snaps up the company's entire allotment of brook trout roe. The problem they're facing, in fact, is a nice one to have: They've been playing around with a small allotment of Jamaican rum in bourbon barrels that previously held their own maple syrup. Everything's on the up-and-up — they purchased the six-year-old rum in 2015 via an importer and moved the juice to a small distillery in Bardstown, Kentucky to age



PHOTO BY JOHN CARLSON

an additional four years — but they don't have a liquor license to bottle and sell the finished product, hence the problem.

Their solution? Join forces with a like-minded Michigan distillery.

Mammoth Distilling's name doesn't match its location. They're headquartered in the tiny northern Michigan town of Central Lake, population 952. They make up for this seeming misnomer by being a big deal within the region, boasting three tasting rooms within the Wolverine State and a robust on- and off-premise presence in and around Chicago. They also know a thing

or two about unique collaborations: Their ongoing Borrowed Time project features small-batch creations built around spirits sourced from other distilleries, resulting in limited-run goodness like a six-barrel blend of 12-year Canadian rye or a four-barrel blend of 10-year-old Tennessee bourbons. "The project's called Borrowed Time because they're essentially products living on borrowed time," explained Phil Attee, Mammoth's sales manager and distillation consultant. "They're extremely limited bottles, and once they're gone, they're gone."

The collaborative spirit of Mammoth's Borrowed Time project seemed to make

it the perfect distillery to bottle BLiS' rum unicorn. All they needed was to connect. Fortunately, they had a mutual matchmaker. "There's a distillery in Grand Rapids called Eastern Kille Distillery that we'd worked with before, and they recommended Mammoth to us," said Sarah Sherman, BLiS' vice president and director of operations. "When we saw what they were doing with Borrowed Time, we thought they were exactly what we were looking for."

"I've been a fan of BLiS from afar for a long time," Attee added. "I love pretty much everything they produce. So, when Eastern Kille told us that BLiS needed help for this maple syrup-finished rum project they were working on, we jumped at the chance."

It's fair to call Attee's admiration justified. Barrel-aged experimentation has been embedded in BLiS' DNA since Chef Owner Steve Stallard launched the company in 2005, resulting in myriad products finished in barrels influenced by booze ranging from beer to bourbon (or, in some cases, beer and bourbon). "We'll experiment with a barrel until its rings fall off," Stallard said. "At the same time, we won't throw something in a barrel just to fit a niche. We're all chefs that have been eating and drinking for a long time, so we have discerning tastes." This is an understatement in Stallard's case — he made his bones at prestigious restaurants like Michelin two-star Taillevent in Paris before building his saucy empire. His palate carries gravitas, and his company's partnership with Mammoth clearly indicates the distillery possesses high standards.

This mutual respect has since coalesced into a rather exciting partnership. Mammoth has bourbon hanging out in BLiS maple syrup barrels. BLiS will age a to-be-determined sauce in the rum barrels after drainage and is also planning on playing with the barrels Mammoth uses for their tart and funky Cherry Bounce liqueur. All these items were made possible because of a few barrels of rum.

PHOTO BY JACOB LEWKOW



TOP **Steve Stallard**,  
*BLiS Gourmet Chef Owner*  
PHOTO BY JACOB LEWKOW

BOTTOM **Sarah Sherman**,  
*BLiS Gourmet Vice President  
and Director of Operations*  
PHOTO BY KATY BATDORFF



Like any good rum-soaked journey should, the BLiS/Mammoth partnership kicked off in the Caribbean. "We had a friend in Jamaica that was connected to their legal system, and she knew her way around there very well," Stallard said. "She tipped us off to a place that had some barrels of rum available, so we went down there to check them out." The intel led Stallard to Hampden Estate, a 260-plus-year-old Jamaican property noted for being one of the country's oldest sugar plantations. The dunder-style rum, which had already been aging for six years, immediately impressed.

"There's a sour, fruity note that came through on the rum due to its high ester count," Stallard explained. "It was intense, and we thought it would work well in a barrel-aging project." The subsequent deal to acquire the rum involved lots of moving parts: BLiS got a Florida importer and a Kentucky distiller involved to legally buy



the rum and start the process of aging the juice in maple syrup bourbon barrels — a process that Mammoth agreed to finish off at their facility four years later. “There was a certain amount of trust needed because of all the parties involved,” Sherman said, “but we were very cautious throughout the whole thing.”

There’s not a whole lot of inventory anticipated for the rum, which will be sold as part of Mammoth’s Borrowed Time project under the name XO Jamaican Rum Reserve. Sherman estimates around 1,200 to 2,000 bottles will be produced. Attee narrows this number to around 1,500. “When we mean small batch, we mean it’s really small,” Attee states. It may seem like a small payoff for all the hoop-jumping endured, but quantity isn’t the point of the exercise. “We’re okay with it being a ‘one and done’ type of product because it tells a unique story that way, one that fits the context of, ‘Oh my God — let me tell you about this one rum I had,’” Sherman explained. “We’re hoping that the bottles go to people that will appreciate the moment in time it will create.”

Although it’s not technically ready as of this writing — it will be by the time you read this — sample sips suggest plenty to appreciate. “The high ester content pushes the envelope in the rum category,” Stallard said. “It’s intense in the way that something like a Laphroig 10 is intense, with a distinct maple kick. People will say, it doesn’t taste like rum, but it does.”

“All you want to do is sip it and dissect it,” Sherman added.

BLiS’ name isn’t on the rum’s label — that’s all Mammoth’s jam. However, each bottle will feature a BLiS neck tag complete with a QR code that leads the customer to a page on BLiS’ website that shares the rum’s story. It’s a subtle touch of cross-marketing that provides a broader experience for the intrigued consumer, one that in a way mirrors the project’s own journey. “This rum made it to Michigan via Jamaica, Florida, and Kentucky over several years,” Attee said. “That’s one heck of a long chain.” **AS**

Visit [www.blisgourmet.com](http://www.blisgourmet.com) or [www.mammothdistilling.com](http://www.mammothdistilling.com) for more information.

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