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Hemispheres

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Bacara

THE DRINK

By Sahar Khan



Read the Tea Leaves

A traditional Afro-Caribbean beverage gives birth to a groundbreaking liqueur



Five percent. That's what Jackie Summers's doctor told him was the chance that the tumor found on his spine in 2010 would not be cancerous. Luckily, the growth did end up being benign, and after that health scare, the Brooklyn-based media executive decided to leave his career to do what he most wanted: "To day drink," he says with a laugh.

That's how, in 2012, Summers became the first known Black man to hold a

license to make liquor in the U.S. after Prohibition. As the base for his product, Sorel, he used *sorrel*, a red tea that's traditionally made with hibiscus flowers and spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, and allspice.

Sorrel originated in West Africa, where it was used for ceremonial and medicinal purposes, and it was brought to the Caribbean by enslaved people. The

drink remains popular throughout the region, with recipes varying from island to island and house to house—some of those including spirits, such as rum. In over 500 years, however, no one had created a version that lasted more than two weeks, because hibiscus is notoriously difficult to preserve.

Summers, who is of Barbadian and Kittitian descent, experimented on his personal recipe, which includes nutmeg, clove, ginger, and cassia, a whopping 623 times before perfecting a shelf-stable version. The 30-proof liqueur is made with organic grain alcohol, and its fruity, spicy, floral bouquet mixes easily with any spirit. "Everyone else is adding flavor to alcohol," says Summers, 54. "I add alcohol to flavor."

The brand received glowing media coverage and was in high demand, but the early days were a roller-coaster. When Summers made sales calls to distributors, they often called security on him because they didn't believe a Black man owned a liquor brand. Hurricane Sandy destroyed the Brooklyn distillery. Deals went sour. In 2016, Summers shuttered the operation.

Last year, however, when the Black Lives Matter movement took off following the death of George Floyd, Summers noticed a renewed interest in Sorel. He secured backing from the Uncle Nearest Venture Fund, an investment fund started by Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey founder Fawn Weaver (whose product is dedicated to the formerly enslaved distiller who taught Jack Daniel how to make whiskey in the

19th century), and this fall he brought Sorel back to market.

Summers sees all of this as a step forward in a narrative that is about far more than liquor. "*Sorrel* is proof that my culture would not be erased," he says.

"My purpose is to let people know that we are a people that persevered." He adds, with a smile, "and also that Sorel is delicious." sorelofficial.com

Above: a Negroni made with Sorel