



Why Rum Master Distiller Sylvia Santiago Will Never Quit

The chief distiller at Puerto Rico's Destilería Serrallés, maker of Don Q, is as committed to her craft as ever, but honest about the sacrifices she made along the way to mastering this male-dominated art form.

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Alicia Menendez:

How does a trained microbiologist end up spending her professional life making rum? That's the story of Sylvia Santiago, the Maestra Ronera in Puerto Rico's Don Q Rum. She has spent almost 50 years in the business and with that experience comes hard earned expertise about what separates a good rum from a great rum, how a business weathers multiple natural disasters, and very strong opinions on the right way to drink rum.

Sylvia, you were studying medical technology. Your plan was to work in a hospital running blood samples. How did you end up at a distillery?

Sylvia Santiago: That's the question that I also ask myself sometimes. I always was inclined to go into the sciences. Going into college, the medical technology attracted me a lot. In fact, I practiced for almost a whole year of my advanced studies. I was working in hospitals, practicing. One of the teachers told me that they were doing interviews for this company that was looking for somebody to work with microbiology, so I had an interview and we were 10 girls in that time. We were a class of just 10 ladies. And they interviewed all of us, so even though I was excited, I wasn't really expecting to receive the offer, so when they told me that they were offering me the position, oh my goodness. It was like a dream.

Menendez: And in your mind, was it like, "Okay, I'm just gonna do this for a little bit and then I'm gonna get back to being in a medical environment," or did you sort of know this was it?

Santiago: I was excited to see something different from hospitals that I didn't think that I could go back. And once I began working, every day was like a discovery, something new. They just wanted somebody who could do tests with yeast, and to do some research with the yeast, so they allowed me that space. You can imagine just recently graduated, completely new, and they were giving me the opportunity to decide which tests to do and which route to go. You felt like they have confidence in you, so you better be the best in this.

I looked for books in the laboratory. I began reading and I began asking questions to everybody. To everybody. Because I didn't know anything about this. And it was great because the people here were really nice, really open to explain. It was wonderful.

Menendez: When we spoke with Yvonne and Yvette Rodriguez, they are twins and co-owners of Tres Lindas, which is a cigar company, they did this amazing impersonation of how men greet them whenever they walk into cigar shops. I want you to take me back to 1973 when you started. How were you, as a woman, as a young woman, as a Latina, greeted within the broader distillery world?

Santiago: I would say that it was with respect mostly with the people that were here at the plant. Most of the people here were... They were mature people, so I believe that they saw me like their daughter or granddaughter. Of course, I was learning, and I started to give ideas, and sometimes to give instructions, so I believe that the change, it was not so difficult as for other women, that sometimes they find it's kind of anger. No, because they know me already.

Menendez: But I think sometimes what happens in those situations, especially when you come into an organization so young, is that everyone, for the entirety of your career there, sort of thinks of you as Sylvita who walked in the door as a child, and so then what I'm curious about is how you went from being a laboratory supervisor to the director of quality control, to compliance director, to your current position. How did you get people to see you and take you seriously?

Santiago: Based mostly in knowledge. Let me tell you. And that's one of the things that I always tell women, is never stop learning because knowledge gives you an edge that is incredible. And that's really what gave me the advantage with our people in terms of how they saw me, because I began learning so fast that when I listened to them and they explained things to me later on, I used to go to them and explain a little bit of why the things that they were telling me, why they were happening. Slowly but surely, they saw me as a person who knew things, who masters things, the subjects, who could explain to them what was happening. And when there was a problem, I could help them correct the problem. It takes time. It takes time.

I come from a very humble family, very poor family. I could study, because the college gave me a scholarship. If not, I wouldn't be able to study, because my family didn't have money to pay for college. I was born in the poorest area in Ponce. My father had to go to the Army just to have enough money to help the family. My mother had to raise us, we were three, almost by herself because he was in the Army. So, those roots are important. You shouldn't forget them.

Ad: *You all know I did not grow up speaking Spanish. My husband did. And it's really important to us that our girls have exposure to the language. When I interviewed Susie Jaramillo, the creator of Canticos, she gifted me a book for my girls, and they love it. Like, we read it all the time. And now the older one is using their bilingual learning app. They use the same nursery rhymes from our childhood, Burrito Sabanero, Elefantitos, and Arroz con Leche, to teach kids concepts like phonics, letters, math, and emotional intelligence through song and play.*

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Menendez: What does it mean to be a Maestra Ronera?

Santiago: The title means that I've been able to work mastering the blending of rums. That I really understand thoroughly the business of rum, the making of rum. That's the title. You don't really be a Maestra Ronera or Maestro Ronero unless you really understand and you have also those capabilities of detecting flavors, of detecting aromas, and of doing that magic of mixing different aged products and at the end have a really strong and good rum. So, that's really what it means for me. It means that I, after so many years, I really understand the rum's story complete.

Menendez: You've been with Don Q for almost 50 years. Was there ever a moment in there where you thought, "I'm done."

Santiago: Well, let me tell you. There was once, when I have my second daughter... I have three. Two boys and a girl. I felt like guilty. And this is very common to Latinas also, because we are supposed to be at home raising the children. So, at that time I thought, "Well, maybe it's time to go home and stay there." But somebody talked to me about this lady that took care of children and does very good, so I said, "Okay, let me try it." Her name was Santa, and she was a saint. Really. She was a saint. She began working and helping me with the children, and I had my third one, and it was so good that I kept working, and when my oldest had about seven years old, I talked to them. They are one year apart. So, it was five, six, and seven. And I talked to them and I told them that probably it was better for me to stay at home with them, and my oldest ones look at me and say, "Why, mommy?"

Well. Well, because you like more for me to be here with you, to stay with you. "No. We are at school and it's okay." And when I began thinking about it, I said, "That's very true." I used to bring them to school early in the morning, so they were in school the whole day until 2:00 or 3:00. My father used to pick them up. And I was back home at 4:30. So, really the time that I was thinking that I should be with them, they were already in school. For me, it was like a... When he told me, "No. Why do you want to stay here?" Okay. And that's true. I was lucky enough also to work in a family-owned company, so there was an opportunity for me to bring them here sometimes for a little while. But they knew the space where I was.

So, that also helps and it's a good idea for the women, if they have the opportunity to bring their children to their workplace, to do it just for them to know where they are when they are not together.

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Menendez: Can you walk me, Sylvia, through the decisions you make as you make rum from the purchase of sugar cane molasses to when we're sipping it in our cuba libres?

Santiago: Yeah. It's decisions all the time, because we start buying the molasses. You have to decide the origin of those molasses, because you want the best ones. You can never produce a good rum unless you start with good molasses. So, that's the first decision is the origin and the amount that you have to buy. Of course, you deal with the prices and those are negotiations that you have to make. That's the not so romantic area of the business. That's the first thing that you have to decide, the origin of from where you are going to buy the molasses.

Then, first thing in the morning, I have to go and taste the production of the previous day. So, that's another decision that we have to make. We have to taste and see if it meets the quality standard that we have. And sometimes you have to decide if you are going to increase production, for example. That's regular day-to-day decisions that we make. You have a process that is running. Nowadays, it's most automated. But if you have to increase volume, you have to check on your orders to see if you have to produce more, those are decisions that we make every day.

Menendez: What separates a bad rum from a good rum from a great rum?

Santiago: Oh. There's so many steps, but each step is important. I already told you about the molasses quality, but about the water that you use, it's very important. In our case, we have some water that... It's not water from the city. We treat our own water, because we receive from the mountains specifically based on a treaty a long time ago, and so that water is very special. It's filtered through the mountains and we take care, so that's another thing. Remember that rum has a lot of water, so it's important.

The yeast. Oh yes, the yeast is key. And the yeast here, let me tell you, yeast is my querendona .. t's my... Remember that I began working with the yeast. For hours, I was looking through the microscope to those beautiful round cells that are the yeasts. It's our own strain of yeast. It's not... We don't buy the yeast. It was recovered back in 1934, more or less, by some doctors who came to the facility, and we take care in the laboratory. We take care of that strain. And it's wonderful. It's so efficient and it's our best worker.

I can tell you a joke, an adult joke.

Menendez: I'm ready. Go for it.

Santiago: It's jokes that I always say that the yeast is our best worker, because it just, like men, it works for food and sex. But I am going to explain that to you and you will agree with me. It is because the yeast uses the sugar in the molasses... Sorry that the lights turned off. The sugar and the molasses to feed and it transforms the sugar into alcohol, so it feeds. But to do that, it also reproduces itself. It's more cells and more cells, so it's really... It's feeding all the time and it's reproducing all the time, so that's why I always say that it's food and sex for the yeast and they are happy. And if they are happy, they produce the best rum. But yes, the yeast is very important. The yeast is very important.

And every step, that's why we have to take care of every step in terms of quality. The dilution that you use, the fermentation time, the distillation is important because you produce a lot of components within the fermentation, and you want to leave some small amounts of those components to stay in the rum, because they will later react in the warehouses, in the aging warehouses, but you want to clean others to take out, so that intelligence in the distillation, it's pretty important. And we are very proud that we mastered that technology here.

And then going into aging, and aging is romance. Aging is mysterious. I love aging, because it happens in a warehouse. You just put the... there, the raw rum there together with the wood of the barrel, in a very dark place, and you just forget it and then the romance... The components of the rum and the components of the wood begin interactions. And it's really like a miracle, because you start with a completely clean liquid. When you see it, it's clear. And after a year or more, when you take that liquid back, it's golden and it has a lot of aroma, and flavors, and it's really completely different, and you say, "Hey, what happened? Something happened there." In a mysterious way.

So, the type of barrel that you use, it's important. And then the blending. That's the best part. I always say that blending is the best part, but only because it's creation. You create a rum. But also, because you taste, and that's... It's when you look for the different components in your mouth and you're thinking will the customer like this flavor? Will the customer like this? And it's really more like artwork but also science blend together in that step.

Menendez: I love how you light up when you talk about rum.

Santiago: Oh, yes.

Menendez: I love it!

Santiago: Yes. I really... After so many years, I still feel a lot of passion of this.

Menendez: I have to tell you, it is apparent. What is the right way to drink rum?

Santiago: If you ask me, go straight. Really. I love... When I drink, I prefer to drink it straight. Not even ice. I like to enjoy finding the different layers of flavor in mouth, so for me it's like serving my drink, and sit down, and taste it, and play with it, and... But rum is so great because not only can you drink it by itself like that. You use it in cocktails, and they are great with cocktails, so yes, drink it if you can drink it straight, but it's so mixable. And we have the dark rums that we have right now, so beautiful ones. The Reserva 7, the Reserva XO, but we also have the flavors, and the flavors I like, like the happy ones. The ones that are good for parties, for the beach, because you mix them with juices. And they mix so well.

So, there is a rum for every occasion.

Menendez: COVID, of course, isn't the only crisis that the island has been through. Hurricane Maria, the recent earthquakes, how did they affect the business?

Santiago: During the Hurricane Maria, we lost our building, our bottling machinery. There was the collapse of the roof. Well, this is a story that makes me feel so proud of my people, because I was... When I entered that building and I saw that, I said, "Oh my God. We are not going to bottle here anymore." And after a couple of hours, one of the engineers came to me and said, "You know what? If we do this, and this, and this, we can repair that." I said, "Wow. That's right." And we began working immediately and we were... You know, we have been blessed. We say that in our warehouses, in our aging warehouses we have angels that drink the portion that evaporates. Those angels were here in the whole plant.

Menendez: Sylvia, thank you so much for this.

Santiago: My pleasure and know that I hope that in the future, when this pandemic goes away, that you come here, and we can sit down and have a tasting of the best rum in the world.

Menendez: Yes, please. What I would give to be in Puerto Rico right now. It sounds amazing.

Santiago: Okay. Well, thank you very much also for your questions and your patience.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Rum Master Distiller Sylvia Santiago Will Never Quit." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., January 31, 2021. LatinaToLatina.com

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