

Joy Spence, Master Blender

Appleton Estate Jamaica Rum

By Hope S. Philbrick

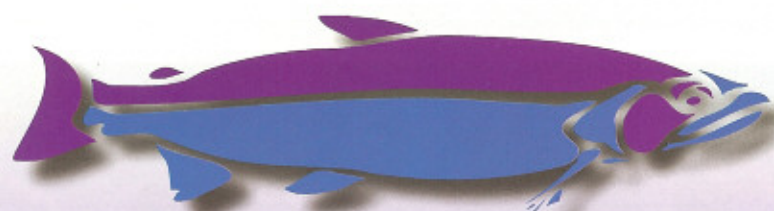
Joy Spence has a rolling laugh that thrums through her speech; the happy sound makes it seem that her parents predicted her personality when they named her. But

they probably never guessed that Spence would become the spirits industry's first female master blender, a distinction she earned in 1997.

Spence's career path began at 13 when she first fell in love with science. "I had a chemistry teacher who was such a great influence on me," she says. "I used to stay back in the evenings and help her prep the lab [for the next lesson] and became fascinated. When that teacher died two years later during childbirth, I decided to pursue a career in science as a tribute to her."

True to her commitment, Spence studied chemistry at the University of the West Indies, graduating with first class honors in 1972. Raised within a family of teachers, Spence initially worked in academia, first at her former high school then at a local university. She earned a master's degree in analytical chemistry in England and returned to Jamaica to pursue a corporate career. In 1979, she joined Estate Industries Limited, the producers of Tia Maria Liqueur, as a research and development chemist. Two years later she joined J. Wray & Nephew Limited as chief chemist, where she worked closely with the then master blender Owen Tulloch and became fascinated by the art of blending. "Owen basically took me under his wing," she says of her mentor for 17 years. During that time Spence held a series of positions including product development manager, technical services manager and total quality manager. In 1996, she was appointed General Manager Technical and Quality Services, a position she now holds concurrently with the responsibility of master blender.

Being a master blender requires "good sensory skills, a background in science — preferably chemistry — and creativity," says Spence. "It requires years of training. Not everyone can differentiate aromas; you need to be able to differentiate and memorize them. No two barrels age the same way," she says, so the different scent and flavor profiles from various barrels are



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Joy Spence, Master Blender of Appleton Estate Jamaica Rum

“blended to create consistency. Making rum is both a science and an art.”

While Spence says that “creating a blend that is accepted internationally and seeing consumers enjoying the product is very rewarding,” her job requires she work an average of 10 hours a day. “If I’m on tour doing promotion, it’s much longer than that. It’s very hectic.”

Even as the first woman in a traditionally male-dominated position, Spence says she faced little resistance within her own company when appointed master blender. “Initially people were surprised, but since I worked as the chemist everybody recognized that I had the skills and talent necessary. By working up the ranks, it didn’t really come as big a shock as it might have had I just come into the company. Things are changing. There are more women in the wine industry; the spirits industry is a bit slower in the conversion.”

Outside her own company, Spence has encountered some less-accepting folks. “Last week someone came up to me and said they were surprised to see me [as a woman] in this position,” says Spence. “I feel the resistance more than anywhere else in particular at immigration. For example, when I was traveling to Mexico, for some reason they took me [out of the line at customs] to ask questions. The agent asked for my job title and when I told him, he laughed, ‘This is the best one I’ve heard all day!’ I pulled out my business card and showed him, but I don’t think he ever believed me. On another trip some time ago to New Zealand, I was traveling [with my mentor]

who was ahead of me in line. When asked the purpose of his travel, Owen said, ‘I’m in the rum business and here to check the markets’ and moved through. Next they asked me and I said, ‘I’m in the rum business,’ and the agent looked at another guy and winked like I was the female companion.”

Such reactions would infuriate many, but Spence laughs them off: “I take it in

stride and try to look at the humorous side of everything,” she says. Seems that crashing through a glass ceiling is easier when buoyed by a positive outlook.

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