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# Return to Rum

A fifth-generation  
heir has big plans for a  
fabled rum distillery.

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**I**n early 2017, Delphine Gardère and her husband, Martin Molère, were living in Paris. She was 33, raised in Haiti, and educated in France and the United States. After graduating from Emory University in Atlanta, Gardère followed opportunities abroad, first in finance with an investment bank in London, then in marketing in the U.K. and France, as she went into the perfume and fragrance trade with Dior and later with Hermès.

In March 2017, Gardère's trajectory altered abruptly. News arrived from Haiti: Her father, Thierry Gardère, had died suddenly from cardiac problems. He was 65, and the fourth generation of Gardère to head up Société du Rhum Barbancourt, which has made Barbancourt rum since 1862. Delphine was his only child. She headed home for the funeral and ended up staying to become the fifth generation to run the distillery. "I always knew I would come back," Gardère says. "I just always thought it would be later."

Consider the challenges Gardère faced upon her return: She was given responsibility to uphold a company of 500 employees that had recently celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, making what's long been revered as a distinctive and remarkable rum. ("The Toast of the World's Elite," claimed ads in the 1930s, not incorrectly; aficionados have long compared Barbancourt to fine Cognac.) Barbancourt was arguably Haiti's most globally prominent business, making it a de facto ambassador to the world. ("It's in our jokes, it's in our rhymes, in our nursery lullabies," one Haitian living in the U.S. told the *The Haitian Times* in 2020.)

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Story by WAYNE CURTIS    Photo by NADIA TODRES



## Delphine Gardère continued

Gardère was taking over at a time in which spirits were undergoing sweeping changes, with consumers (and profits) moving toward limited-run, premium products. And she was returning to a country that has faced a seemingly endless series of challenges, including political upheaval, global boycotts, and natural disasters (the 2010 earthquake killed some 200,000). Then there was the high-profile slugging in 2018 by the then-leader of the free world (“Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” Trump was quoted as saying in the Oval Office), followed more recently by political violence leading to the July assassination of President Jovenel Moïse. And she was doing all this in her early 30s, as a mother of two young daughters, and as a woman in a male-dominated industry.

Gardère faced one other challenge: her extended family. Upon Thierry’s death, his estate was divided between Delphine and her mother. Among other assets, Delphine chose the Barbancourt legacy, inheriting all of her father’s shares in the company and becoming managing partner. (The family-owned company’s charter requires a two-thirds vote for any decision to be implemented; since Delphine owned more than one-third, she was in a position to sway company direction.) Yet her father’s siblings and a cousin pushed back, triggering a landslide of litigation and wrangling over control of the company. “It was a bit complicated,” Gardère says diplomatically.

After three long years of legal to and fro, Gardère ultimately initiated arbitration per the company’s bylaws; she won. Her legal victory triggered the full withdrawal of her father’s siblings and the cousin from Barbancourt. At a press conference last November, she announced Delphine Gardère Holdings now owned the company in full and that she had total control of it moving forward. Then, she announced plans to increase production. “There were a lot of things we were not able to put in motion until we got a settlement with the family,” Gardère says.

Since returning to her office last year, she’s been catching up on priorities long postponed, starting with bringing back some earlier employees—including rehiring a former master distiller. Among other stalled plans she aims to get back on the schedule: eliminating a production bottleneck by upgrading the bottling line, in the works since 2015 initially under Gardère’s father but derailed by litigation. “We have to get back to basics,” she says.

Basics also include revisiting the distillation process. As was the case with many West Indian distilleries, Barbancourt’s rums were for decades a blend of distillates produced on both pot stills and column stills. Pot stills produce a fuller, more aromatic rum; column stills make a lighter, crisper rum. The company’s pot stills went out of commission during a global economic embargo in the early 1990s, which came in response to a military coup, and getting parts was impossible. That shift coincided with a widespread modernization of distilleries worldwide, when competing globally meant scrambling to increase size and scale. “It was about being big and beautiful in the ’90s,” Gardère says. “And now we’re going back to craft.”

The decommissioned pot stills may be beyond restoration; Gardère has been conferring with brassworks abroad about a replacement still. The goal is to bring back notes from the not-so-distant past. “We have some old bottles that we were able to taste,” she says. “Pot stills definitely give [the rum] a distinct aroma.”

The trick for Barbancourt? To embrace earlier styles and flavor profiles without diverging too dramatically from current consumer expectations. That includes ensuring that the rum is always made from fresh sugarcane juice rather than molasses, as has been the distillery’s approach for more than a century. “Obviously, we’re not going to change the product,” she says. “It’s all about improving with time.”

While Gardère’s flagship rums will get tweaks and upgrades, she’s also looking at expanding the variety of expressions Barbancourt releases, with an eye to joining the top shelf with other high-end rum distillers. “I can’t lie—we’re looking at premiumization,” she says. She’s not announcing plans just yet but suggests, “We’re looking at all sorts of things.”

That doesn’t give them license to go wild; Gardère understands that they have to color within the lines. Adding can ultimately mean subtracting if the expansion is done without a clear intent and understanding of history. “We’re a light-body rum, with a citrus aroma,” she says. “And if we went for something that was sweet and caramely, people would ask, ‘What are they adding to the brand? How does this fit with our DNA?’ We can’t go for a completely different aromatic profile.”

Gardère says her experiences living and working off the island and outside the spirits industry have allowed her to approach these challenges with a fresh perspective. “When you work outside of your family business, you get to know your strengths and weaknesses—especially when dealing with large-scale operations,” she says. For those who start and stay within the confines of a family business, “it’s sometimes really hard for people to grow and evolve.”

And she figures her earlier experience in an industry that caters to a high-end clientele won’t hurt in plotting a course ahead. “Rum and fragrance are both escapism,” she says. “Or at least they trigger escapism.”

Gardère isn’t the first woman to run Barbancourt—when founder Dupré Barbancourt died in 1907, his widow, Nathalie, ran the distillery for a time. (Suitably, Delphine’s middle name is Nathalie, after her ancestor.) But Gardère is aware that she’s taking the helm in a male-dominated industry that’s only starting to accept the emergence of powerful women. “I was young and I was female,” she says of the rocky transition. “I think for some people, it was hard,” she says. “Well, not hard. *Challenging*. Let’s put it that way.”

Among her aims is to increase the power and influence of women around her. Her lab manager is a woman, as is her new chief financial officer and her buying manager. And when a female employee recently confessed a dream to go to France to study engineering and mechanics, Gardère helped her make it happen financially. “It’s quite rare to have women in these types of positions,” Gardère says.

As it is to have a notable rum company owned and run by a woman of any age, never mind one who has bold plans to expand and update a company celebrating its 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year. She may speak in whispers when it comes to specific plans for the company’s evolution, but not so much when it comes to her broader goals. “Dear ambitious woman, ask for more,” read an image she posted on her Twitter account last spring, to which she added, “Don’t be afraid ... to be ambitious, to be outspoken, to know your craft, or to ask for more. You deserve it all.” ■