

Dear Esteemed Colleagues and Stakeholders,



As we stride into the promising horizons of 2024, it brings me great pleasure to reflect on the remarkable journey of the West Indies Rum & Spirits Producers Association (WIRSPA) over the past year. Serving as the Chairperson has been both an honour and a privilege, and I am deeply proud of the significant milestones we have achieved together.

The year 2023 marked a significant moment in WIRSPA's history as we recently celebrated our 50th anniversary as a formal institution. It was also a groundbreaking year as we welcomed the first female Chairperson to lead our esteemed association. This remarkable achievement underscores the progressive ethos that drives our organization forward. Moreover, we are witnessing a positive trend towards gender diversity within our member companies, with an increasing number of women assuming leadership roles across various domains within the industry. The grouping currently has at least five producers headed by women. This inclusivity is a testament to our commitment to fostering a more representative and equitable landscape within the rum and spirits sector.

Not only has the gender balance of staff in our industry become more representative of our societies, but WIRSPA has grown to now include all the 15 member states of the Caribbean Forum and Caricom and is branching out to smaller producers in the non-independent territories. Our logic in this is simple – the Caribbean is known as the birthplace of modern rum, and the more producers making authentic Caribbean rums according to our rules and international best practices, the better for everyone.

I think a core strength of our grouping is how we have managed to make room for many smaller producers. The ongoing technical support given to smaller producers by the WIRSPA Secretariat, our larger members, and our network of consultants is a great source of pride. As one of the small-medium sized distilleries in WIRSPA, St. Lucia Distillers has benefited tremendously from the organisation and its programs over the past two decades, beginning in the 2000s when we, along with many of our members, received substantial grants to modernise equipment and systems, train staff and improve marketing, through to the present.

A highlight of our technical collaboration in 2023 was the resumption of in-person technical committee meetings – our most recent meeting was hosted by Barbados last October, was extremely well attended by producers, and enriched by a visit to the Barbados distilleries.

Looking ahead to 2024, we eagerly anticipate the Caribbean Distilling Seminar, a collaboration with the Ethanol Technology Institute of Lallemand, preceded by our WIRSPA Suppliers Showcase, in Saint Lucia in April. This flagship event promises to be insightful and transformative, offering invaluable opportunities for learning, networking, and growth within our industry.

Our 2023 Annual General Meeting in Guyana marked a significant milestone as it heralded our first face-to-face gathering since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The enthusiastic participation underscored the enduring spirit of camaraderie and collective endeavour that defines our association. Our meeting was enriched by high quality engagements with the Assistant Secretary General of Caricom responsible for the Single Market and Trade, as well as the Senior Vice President of the International Agency for Responsible Drinking (IARD).

As a long-standing member of the IARD's Partnership Council, WIRSPA members shared our concerns about messaging coming out of the World Health Organization that appeared to demonise producers and retailers of alcoholic beverages. Recognizing that moderate use of alcoholic beverages forms a part of Caribbean society and culture, and indeed for rum, a cornerstone of the visitor experience, the message that no amount of alcohol was safe was a worrying development. We agreed that we needed to redouble our efforts to demonstrate not only the significance of the sector to the Caribbean economy but also the concerted efforts being made to ensure our members adhere to our very strict marketing codes and the variety of actions being taken by our brands to promote responsible drinking and reduce alcohol harm.

A real success story for us is the degree to which our members have adopted new labelling standards that show highly legible information on serving sizes on our labels and also include advisory logos against drinking under 18, drinking in pregnancy, and drinking and driving. We will continue in 2024 to do our best to encourage other producers of alcoholic beverages to adopt these best practice standards because together we can make a bigger effort to reduce the excessive use of alcohol.

Our engagement with the Assistant Secretary General of Caricom enabled us to reinforce key areas of interest for producers in relation to the Caricom review of the Common External Tariff and the Rules of Origin, as well as concerns around the Cariforum Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union and the United Kingdom.

Aside from these ongoing issues, producers expressed a strong interest in accessing new markets for our premium spirits, particularly the emerging markets in Asia, such as India and China. We also discussed with the Assistant Secretary General our advocacy around maintaining best practices and transparency in rum production and labelling and concerns about ethyl alcohol allegedly being used in non-WIRSPA territories to produce 'rum'.

Our success as the largest export product-sector in Caricom and Cariforum (after minerals) is underpinned by the continuing support of regional governments through facilitating measures and trade agreements. We were pleased to continue to receive the support of Caribbean governments in 2023 for several areas of core interest to us around protecting rum provenance.

Our advocacy against proposals to alter, without consultation, trade rules around glass packaging has been largely responsible for the adoption of a more transparent and open approach to this issue.

Even as we recently celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so is the Caribbean Community celebrating its own 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023, with a calendar of activities ending in mid-2024. As producers of the Caribbean's premier and best-known quality product, we are pleased to have been asked by the Community to honour this celebration with a series of bespoke products, **Caricom@50** rum expressions that will be presented to Caricom heads of government in July 2024, and distributed to member states and international representatives.

Increasingly our focus has turned to issues of sustainability – looking at our supply chains and our impact on the environment, particularly strategies to reduce our carbon footprint. This year 2024 will see the completion of our long-awaited publication that will showcase our producers' increasing use of renewable energies and carbon reduction strategies.

Over and above this issue we remain very concerned about supply chain vulnerability. Having just recovered from pandemic induced supply chain collapses, producers are now faced with steeply rising raw material costs, chief among them our raw material, molasses, and recent worrying developments around key shipping routes such as the Panama Canal and the Red Sea Passage.

While much of our export effort is targeted to faraway markets, we recognise the importance of telling the story of rum to visitors to our countries, having them experience our products and our heritage at its source. The '**Caribbean Rum Trail**' that we're building will seek to encapsulate the full experience around rum and its history in our countries, starting with our distilleries and eventually growing to encompass a full visitor experience.

In conclusion, I am immensely proud to lead the most vibrant regional private sector organization in the Caribbean, with an engaged membership actively pursuing core issues and activities of importance to both our membership and wider society as responsible corporate citizens. I am committed to supporting this effort to the best of my ability, both now and in the future.



**Margaret P. Monplaisir – Chairperson, WIRSPA**

**February 2024**