

A Pioneer in the Industry

An Interview with Silvia Santiago, Maestra Ronera, Destilería Serrallés, Inc.



Silvia Santiago

EDITORS' NOTE Silvia Santiago began her career with Don Q Rum in 1973 working with the fermentation as a microbiologist and continued moving to other positions including Laboratory Supervisor, Director of Quality Control, and Compliance Director prior to assuming her current position. She is responsible for the entire manufacturing process, from the purchase of sugarcane molasses to bottling the finished product, including blending and tasting distillates and aged products.

COMPANY BRIEF The heritage of Destilería Serrallés (donq.com) began around 1820 when Juan Sebastián Serrallés left Spain and settled in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Soon after, he founded the Hacienda Teresa, a sugar cane plantation. In 1865, his son, Don Juan Serrallés, produced his first casks of rum. In 1898, the Serrallés family was granted the exclusive right to the Río Inabón, a river winding through Puerto Rico's volcanic mountains, which remains the exclusive water source for Don Q Rum. Following the end of prohibition, the Don Q brand, named after Don Quijote, was launched and its award-winning tradition continues today.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of Don Q and how the brand has evolved?

Don Q has a long history, with almost 88 years in the market. The Serrallés family was in Puerto Rico long before 1865 and were leaders in the sugar industry. They knew a lot about rum, of course, because those two products are tied together in history. The family's dream was to produce the best rum in the world. We still have the small room where the Don Q formula was developed, and it is the same recipe that is used today. Their dedication, commitment, and mastery in making premium rums goes back six generations of rum makers. The family's values are within in every employee at the company, and producing the best rum is second nature to us all.

In the beginning, the brand had only the base rums: Gold, Cristal and 151°. Later, more aged rums appreciated by customers entered the portfolio. With time the market changed, and the customer demanded diversification. The flavored rums satisfied

that demand: Limon, Coco, Pasion, Piña. Lately, the Reserve rums which are so well valued by the rum connoisseur have been enriching the brand and, most recently, the Double Aged rums, añejos with a finish in a different barrel. The brand has evolved, but what does not change is the quality and the character of our rum.



Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

My role is to lead in manufacturing the best rum in the world. I am responsible for ensuring that all the employees who work on the rum process – from receiving the raw material, fermentation, distillation, aging, blending, bottling, until the final product leaves the plant for distribution – are doing their jobs thoroughly. Our primary focus is giving the customer the product that they expect and providing the best value, without compromising quality.

What have been the keys to Don Q's industry leadership and how do you describe the Don Q difference?

Don Q has always been a pioneer in the industry, from our rum-making process, where



Liza Cordero and Silvia Santiago, Don Q Rum Master Blenders



we cultivate our own yeast strain, to our wide range of rums. We offer approachable flavored rums to exquisite, aged rums that are both part of our permanent portfolio like the Gran Reserva XO and the Reserva 7, to some limited-edition Double Barrel Aged Cask Finish rums that we release in limited quantities. In Fall 2022, we released the Double Aged Cognac Cask Finish and in early 2023, we will be releasing Double Aged Zinfandel Cask Finish Rum and Double Aged Port Cask Finish Rum.

In addition to being a leader in the rum category, we are also industry leaders in establishing an eco-friendly production process. The company cares deeply about our Puerto Rican heritage, community, and island. Don Q, which is made in Ponce, Puerto Rico, has several eco-conscious practices which help preserve the waterways surrounding our island.

How critical is it for Don Q to continue to innovate and where is innovation taking place for the brand?

Innovation is in Don Q's DNA so it will always be a priority for us. Innovation is necessary when you are a leader – it promotes growth and avoids complacency. From the breadth of our offerings, to how we produce our rums, to who is at the helm of production, Don Q has always been at the forefront of

innovation. I became Master Blender for Don Q Rum 19 years ago and was Puerto Rico's first female Master Blender; I hold that title with extreme pride. Along with that comes tremendous responsibility to set the right example and serve as a mentor for other female professionals in the industry.

A Master Blender must be creative in order to innovate as well as have good sensory memory. A vital part of my role is remembering what rums I have in the warehouse and how our team can use those rums to develop new products.

From a product innovation perspective, we have the flexibility to experiment with aging in different barrels, which is why we released the Double Aged Cask Finish rums. In addition to the recent Cognac, Zinfandel and Port releases, we have also released a Double Aged Vermouth Cask Finish and a Double Aged Sherry Cask Finish in addition to our Signature Single Barrel release in 2009.

We believe in the traditional way of making rum. We don't want to change the winning formula, however, we always listen to our customers and rum enthusiasts and keep our ear to the ground of what's trending and what resonates with our fans. Our innovation is fluid and its insights-based. Above all, it must taste good and follow our philosophy and strict standards.

Will you provide an overview of Don Q's product offerings?

We have the Serrallés Collection, which is our portfolio of aged rums including the Reserva 7 and Gran Reserva XO. The portfolio also includes our limited-edition releases like La Reserva de la Familia, the Double Aged Cask Finish releases including Double Aged Cognac Cask Finish, and the Don Q Oak Barrel Spiced.

In terms of our everyday and mixing rums, we have four flavored rums which were inspired by the native flavors of Puerto Rico and include Coco, Piña, Limón, and Pasión. These can be enjoyed neat, with ice, or in cocktails.

Additionally, there are the award-winning Don Q Cristal and Don Q Gold. Cristal is a clear rum that is aged, but neutral enough to serve in cocktails. The Gold is a light amber rum with the vanilla notes of the wood, excellent for Piña Coladas. In fact, Don Q Gold was the rum used in the first-ever Piña Colada served at the Caribe Hilton by Monchito Marrero in 1954. As you can see, Don Q is embedded into Puerto Rican culture and history.

What has allowed you to offer a high-quality, premium product at an accessible price?

As an independently, family-owned business, we have the flexibility to price competitively and innovate freely and that's what we have done. We take a lot of pride in the rums that we bottle and want to make Don Q accessible to as many rum and drink enthusiasts to enjoy. We have turned all the recent challenges into opportunities for growth and innovation.

You are celebrating 50 years at the distillery. What has made the experience so special for you?

I have seen so many changes for good. The appreciation that we receive for the brand and the recognition on the quality makes me feel proud. In each bottle of Don Q, there is a little bit of my energy.

One of the most memorable experiences for me was when my daughter told me how proud she is of my role at the company and in the industry. I hope my legacy is that I brought more women to the decision-making table, and when people read about my career trajectory, they know that if it was possible for me, it's possible for them no matter what industry they are in.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in the industry?

Women have always been in the spirits industry, just in a quiet way. Now they have more of a presence and are inspiring others to be part of this community. I am so happy to see so many vibrant and passionate women in the industry today.

What are your priorities for Don Q as you look to the future?

Most importantly, to keep bringing new, winning products to the market and at the same time helping my colleagues at Destilería Serrallés elevate our brand. ●