

## Art And Science

An Interview with Silvia Santiago, Master Blender and Senior Vice President, Manufacturing, Destilería Serrallés, Inc.



Silvia Santiago

**EDITORS' NOTE** Silvia Santiago stands as a trailblazer in the world of rum, not just for her unparalleled expertise but for her role as Puerto Rico's first female Master Blender. As the esteemed Maestra Ronera of Destilería Serrallés, the creators of Don Q Rum, her journey began in 1973 when she first stepped into the world of fermentation as a young microbiologist. Since then, her dedication and passion have propelled her to become the Senior Vice President of Manufacturing, overseeing every intricate detail of the rum-making process – from selecting the finest sugarcane molasses to blending and tasting the perfect aged distillates. Santiago's influence extends beyond the distillery walls. She is a visionary who carefully balances the tradition of crafting exceptional rum with the ever-growing demand for innovation. In her hands, every new aroma, every nuanced flavor becomes an opportunity to push the boundaries of what rum can be, while still paying homage to the time-honored methods that have made Don Q a symbol of excellence.

**COMPANY BRIEF** The heritage of Destilería Serrallés ([donq.com](http://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 Quixote, was launched and its award-winning tradition continues today.

### Will you discuss your career journey?

I've always been drawn to science. I studied medical technology, a mix of sciences connected to the health of human beings. Because of my background in microbiology, Serrallés hired me to work with fermentation and yeast. At the time, I had no idea where this path could lead, but I was hungry for knowledge and quickly fell in love with rum production. I learned by asking questions and never saying no to an opportunity.

That's how I came to understand the process. As I gained knowledge, I rose through the ranks. The area that particularly captivated me, and still does, is rum blending. I learned the nuances of this task from mentors, veterans in the distilling and aging process at Serrallés. Working with the formulations connected me with the energy of those who crafted blends before me. After holding supervisory and management positions, I now serve as Master Blender and Senior Vice President of the entire manufacturing operation. My passion remains rum blending, where all the senses come together to create new rums.

### Will you highlight Don Q's history and heritage?

This year, we are celebrating our 160th anniversary. The family's history began around 1820 when the first Serrallés, Juan Sebastián,



Don Q barrel pull





*Don Q barrel room*

came from Cataluña, Spain. Hacienda Teresa was founded, and his son, Don Juan Serrallés, began producing his first cask of rum. Six generations of Serrallés have forged this history.

Making Don Q rum involves both art and science. Clean fermentation with our proprietary yeast is the base, controlled distillation establishes the balance of flavor components, and the artisanal aging process gives us the rums to work with in the unique blending phase. The accumulated wisdom and in-depth knowledge of each of these steps, together with respect to tradition, have helped us become the most prestigious rum in Puerto Rico.

#### **What have been the keys to Don Q's growth and industry leadership?**

We are focused on the consumer. We have our goals clear, and we work on the plan to achieve them. Our commitment to quality and the pursuit of understanding our consumers' preferences help us remain favored by the market. Nowadays, the consumer is becoming more demanding, both in terms of the quality of the products and in terms of the clarity of the process. They want to know the history, the process, and what they can do with the products. We offer them honest, memorable rums, those that, when you take a sip, invite you to a second. The preference and loyalty to our products motivate us to continue providing the best. Like Don Quixote, the pursuit of perfection is our guiding principle.

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

Don Q was launched in 1934 with white rum, gold rum, and 151°. The portfolio always included an añejo rum, very aged and full-bodied, like El Dorado. Today, the offering is ample. In the line of what we call traditional rums, we have Don Q Cristal, a youthful, clear, smooth, mixable rum and Don Q Gold, a classic gold rum, with more body, wood, and citrus notes perfect for a Piña Colada or a tasty Cuba Libre.

In the flavors, we have Lemon, Coconut, Passion Fruit, Pineapple, and Orange. These can be enjoyed neat or with your favorite mixer. Innovation can be found in the double-aged rums such as Don Q Port. These are traditionally aged rums that complete their aging in a different cask to provide an extra finish.

We also provide exceptional blends such as Don Q Reserva 7 and Don Q Gran Reserva XO, which are meant to be savored, to be appreciated with every sip.

#### **How ingrained is Don Q's commitment to sustainability as part of its culture and values?**

Sustainability is a concept that you live by. At Serrallés, it is ingrained in every part of the business. We want our process to be cleaner and greener, and we invest a lot of time and resources toward that goal. We've installed solar panels. In all production areas, the reuse of process water is pursued. We use LPG as fuel in our utilities. We recover and recycle packaging materials – these are just some examples of what we do to help preserve our environment.

#### **How important has it been to build the Don Q team?**

One person alone can achieve a private goal, but a team can achieve the extraordinary. A united and inspired team is unstoppable. Each member of the team contributes their vision, their value. All the successes we have achieved as a company are the result of the team effort. That is what we look for in our employees: to be part of the team.

When you start working at Serrallés, you are an ordinary person, with dreams and a bit of ambition. Then you're caught up in the passion of the business: the rums, the history, the processes – they get under your skin. Then, you become a champion.

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

To keep creating exceptional products that elevate our company and our category to the level they deserve. ●

