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Caribbean Airlines



# *Caribbean* **Beat**



Beloved in communities around the world, sorrel is an integral, evocative part of Caribbean Christmas celebrations. But, as **Shelly-Ann Inniss** discovers, the red sepals of this versatile flower have benefits and inspire innovations far beyond a treasured seasonal beverage

# SORREL: THE TASTE OF MEMORY

**D**uring the Christmas season, roadside stalls and markets across the Caribbean overflow with loads of plump, freshly harvested sorrel. Its piquant notes are often complemented by cinnamon, cloves, bay leaves, and other spices (and, in some cases, rum!) as we enjoy it all season long. In the United States — and countries around the world — several sorrel concoctions also form part of holiday traditions, reminding us how connected we are.

A species of flowering plant native to Africa — which then spread to Asia and the Caribbean during the 16th and 17th centuries — you'll hear myriad names for *Hibiscus sabdariffa*. In the Caribbean, of course, we call it sorrel. In the US, you'll hear roselle (the plant's official name), Florida cranberry, and hibiscus. Africans call it zobo, sobolo, and bissap (the national drink of Senegal). And Europeans, Thais and Latin Americans say karkadé, krachiap, and flor de Jamaica, respectively.

Its worldwide appeal and diverse preparation methods make it a drink as varied as it is universal — one both shaped by and steeped in history. Just ask Jackie Summers, founder of Jack from Brooklyn Inc and Sorel Liqueur. His Barbadian grandad (a chef) taught his mother how to make it, who in turn taught him.

The distinctive spelling and pronunciation — “Sorel” with one “r”, and pronounced “sorelle” like “roselle” — was deliberate. Due to a speech impediment, Summers had difficulty pronounc-



ing the letters “r” and “l”. Shifting the emphasis from the first syllable to the second helped him pronounce it more easily and made the word feel happier and more upbeat.

It took him 624 tries to perfect his multiple award-winning Sorel Liqueur, which was launched over a decade ago. *The New York Times*' 2013 holiday guide described it as “Christmas in a bottle”.

Sorrel aficionados across the region can certainly understand why. Traditional Christmas fare like sorrel brings back memories of preparing the house for the holidays, and sharing meals and special moments surrounded by beloved

**Right** Jackie Summers  
**Below** Eric Depradine  
 of Zydeco Meadery  
**Opposite page** *Hibiscus  
 sabdariffa*, aka sorrel  
 or roselle

friends and family. But as much as sorrel now has a treasured place in the hearts of Caribbean people, its history in the region is far more complex.

“Part of the reason there’s never been a standardised version of this beverage is because every island had a different version — based not just on the enslaved Africans, but the influence of the indentured servants who they lived alongside,” Summers shared in an interview with *Today*.

For example, Jamaicans add ginger to theirs, possibly due to the influence of Chinese indentured immigrants, while East Indian labourers in Trinidad & Tobago might have contributed the clove and cinnamon to Trini-style sorrel.

Summers added that another likely reason for the variation between recipes across the region, and across generations, is that the original sorrel makers were neither permitted nor empowered to read or write. Even today, many of our parents and grandparents neglect to document their recipes. So, when any of us is trying to replicate the recipes we love, we either must do it by instinct or make a call.

**T**his is how Eric Depradine — owner of Zydeco Meadery, a small business in Massachusetts — began the journey of his carbonated hibiscus mead, Carnival Rose. “The problem with making sorrel is that no one’s grandmother had a set recipe,” says Depradine.



COURTESY DOMINIC FREDDURA AND ASHIA AUBOURG



CLAY WILLIAMS, COURTESY SORELL LIQUEUR

Since 2012, when he lived in Louisiana, Depradine has been making mead — which is done with honey (owing to its having more fermentable sugars than grapes, leading to a higher alcohol content than wine).

When he created Carnival Rose in 2021, his then 91-year-old Trinidadian grandmother Ena Depradine lived in Boston, so he’d consult her via phone — along with his elderly great-aunt Shirley Depradine in Brooklyn. Were these consultations successful?

“It tastin’ good. You need to add more spice,” he jokes, mimicking his beloved elders in a high-pitched Trini accent. But he was left to wonder: which spice? Cinnamon, clove, Allspice, something else? Their lack of specificity left Depradine no choice but to experiment.

He dealt with foam issues, tweaked the process, avoided bottling the sediment after it settled, and introduced carbon dioxide to make the drink more “celebratory” — effervescent like champagne or sparkling wine. And this is what sets Carnival Rose apart.

He met with some initial resistance, but found people pleasantly surprised after tasting the mead. “The same people who said they don’t like sweet wines are the same ones who’d buy Carnival Rose,” he says. “Some people might not have tried those flavours before, but after sampling they buy a bottle or two... It’s amazing dealing with the sceptics.”

Depradine also took his wife DeAundra’s suggestion to try sorrel mead inspired by his grandmother Ena’s recipe. And today, Carnival Rose is one of the small business best sellers. But sorrel remains far more significant to their family than that. “It unites us back to our ancestors in West Africa, particularly on Juneteenth — our African-American Emancipation Day in the US,” he says.

Left Nzinga Knight's non-alcoholic Brooklyn Brewed Sorrel is adored by Beyoncé and the James Beard Foundation  
Below Eric Depradine with the Zydeco Meadery family

*Traditional Christmas fare like sorrel brings back memories of preparing the house for the holidays, and sharing meals and special moments surrounded by beloved friends and family*

hypertensive, anti-diabetic, diuretic, and other properties.

Served year-round in the US at parties, limes, and on relaxing afternoons, US sorrel or roselle concoctions generally use the dried hibiscus flowers. These have a different intensity from the fresh sorrel, but the longer it steeps, the bolder the flavour.

In a *New York Times* article, food scientist Harold McGee suggests cold-brewing them, because a two-hour cold infusion extracts as much of the pigments as a standard hot infusion, fostering a fruitier flavour and reduced acidity.

Drink trends generally develop quickly, and beverages made with sorrel — teas, punches, cordials, spritzers, liqueurs, cocktails, and syrups — continue to stand out because of sorrel's irresistible charm, rooted in perseverance, resilience, and nostalgia.

Sustaining our sorrel traditions — across borders and histories — is certainly something worth celebrating for generations to come. ■



ROBERT ALVAREZ, COURTESY BROOKLYN BREWED SORREL

Juneteenth is celebrated with a constant flow of red drinks like strawberry soda, Kool-Aid, Kola Champagne, hibiscus iced tea, or Agua de Jamaica. Some culinary historians like American Adrian Miller have been spreading an awareness about the cultural similarities with red-based beverages and celebrations, calling these drinks “liquid soul”.

Another culinary historian, Michael Twitty, supports this correlation on his blog *Afroculinaria*, stating the colour red for both the African and African-American cultures is “the embodiment of spiritual power and transformation”.

It's no surprise then that in New York, Nzinga Knight — owner of the Brooklyn Brewed Sorrel brand, and of Guyanese and Trinidadian parentage — has also celebrated Caribbean cultural connections with her special non-alcoholic brew, inspired by her dad's sorrel recipe. Among her faithful customers are the James Beard Foundation and Beyoncé.

**B**eyond its associations with seasonal festivity and connections to “home”, sorrel has many potential medicinal benefits, with research ongoing into its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial, anti-



COURTESY ERIC DEPRADINE