Walking through the canal district of central Amsterdam can be disorienting to all your senses. The cobbled streets and sidewalks are narrow and filled with what seems an endless stream of bicycles, mobile and stationary. The 17th century-era row houses lining the canals are all similar in style and color — three stories tall and nestled tightly together as far as the eye can see. Every block looks similar to the prior block, austere but beautiful. It’s only thanks to Google Maps that we’ve located a particularly important address, a major epicenter of the rum world. From the street, though, it appears like any other nicely appointed Dutch residence; it’s only sign of what’s inside is a small polished brass plate under the doorbell Mrs. Wonk and I have found our way here on this February morning to visit the inner sanctum of E&A Scheer—a serious heavy hitter in the worldwide rum business, but one you’ve likely never heard of.
Rum is the most global of spirits, crafted on six of the seven continents (Antarctica’s Mount Rumdoodle notwithstanding). The rum world is vast in scope, with hundreds of distillers producing spirit for thousands of brands. Supersized players such as Bacardi and Captain Morgan are well known and straightforward—they make rum, then they sell it. But putting those companies aside, the central hub that connects much of the rum world is E&A Scheer. If you’re any sort of rum drinker, it’s almost certain you’ve had rum that’s passed through E&A Scheer’s Amsterdam-based operation. But almost as certain is the fact that they remain nearly invisible.

E&A Scheer is a Dutch company with roots in the rum business reaching back to 1762, the time of the triangle trade between Africa, the New World, and the Old World. In the intervening 250 years or so, they have evolved into a critical player in the world rum business, connecting distillers to brands, and ultimately to you, the rum consumer. In short, their business is this: E&A Scheer imports bulk rums into the Netherlands from more than twenty countries, blends them to customer specifications, and sells them to brands in more than forty five countries. Those brands are some of the very bottles on your own shelves or those of your favorite bar—the ones evoking small, family-owned craft distilleries, rustling cane fields, and warm island sunsets. All still true, if by way of a detour through blending tanks in the Port of Amsterdam.

The E and A of the company name are the initials of Evert and Anthonie Scheer, Dutch brothers who formed a trading company in the Amsterdam in the mid-1700s. Originally devised as a general purpose trading company in the same vein as the Dutch West India Company, by the 1800s the company had narrowed their focus to the trading and blending of rums and Batavia Arrack (an Indonesian cane-based spirit), and doing well enough at that to propel their company forward in the rum business for the next 250 years.
Today E&A Scheer is no boutique operation, selling a few pallets of rum barrels here and there. Their operating scale is massive: Each year they sell the equivalent volume of more than 33 to 35 million bottles of rum, making their volumes larger than Appleton and in the same league as Havana Club, based on estimates of their sales volumes. E&A Scheer’s customers range from inexpensive supermarket labels up through well-known and highly regarded brands revered by the rum cognoscenti. No other company is woven so seamlessly into the fabric connecting rum producers and consumers, yet rarely appears on any label.
All this begs the question: Why have so few people, including most rum aficionados, never heard of E&A Scheer? The short answer: The company prefers it that way. Their customers are the brands that purchase rum for resale—and most of the brand’s consumers likely never even consider that as a provenance, though it happens more often than not. Keeping a low profile is good for business—upstaging your customers is a surefire way to create strained relationships. E&A Scheer doesn’t try to be invisible, and they won’t deny their involvement with a brand if asked, but you also won’t find them co-promoting themselves on rum bottles. (Think the “Intel Inside” stickers on your laptop, as a comparison from the opposite vantage point.)

So who are E&A Scheer’s customers? You won’t find any trace of them on the company’s web site. That’s not what they’re about. A comprehensive customer list is hard to come by. But with a bit of digging, you can start to assemble a somewhat comprehensive customer list—and you’ll likely be surprised by who is on it. For now, let’s start with just one—Denizen Rum. They get the honor here, as they’re the only brand to date to openly state their relationship with E&A Scheer. I’ve written about Denizen several times previously, and even wrote a bit about E&A Scheer in my review of Denizen’s Merchant’s Reserve. In my original interview with CEO Nick Pelis, he shared that they source their Aged White and Merchant’s Reserve blended rums via E&A Scheer, as well as details about the distillery provenance of the Denizen blends. It was Nick who first
turned me on to the E&A Scheer story in the first place.

Denizen’s experience as an E&A Scheer customer is quite typical. When Nick decided to create the Denizen brand, he quickly learned that the sourcing and logistics required to purchase and transport rums from distilleries can be overwhelming. In addition, maintaining a consistent flavor profile for a nascent brand can be hard, especially with a multi-island blend. There may be large variations in flavor from batch to batch, and distilleries may not be able to provide the desired quantities on short notice when you need it.

This is where E&A Scheer’s hundreds of years of expertise becomes a great asset to the brand. Scheer has vast supplies of distillates from numerous producers at their disposal, and they possess the ever-evolving expertise to modify recipes on the fly as needed to maintain a consistent flavor profile. In the face of inconsistent batches or distilleries not being able to supply in sufficient quantity, a brand like Denizen can place a reliable product on bar shelves, year after year.

On this Thursday morning visit, we are set to meet with Carsten Vlierboom, E&A Scheer’s Managing Director and Master Blender. Finger poised over the brass doorbell, we had no idea what to expect—simply having the opportunity to ask questions was enough to bring us here. Reaching for the doorbell, I noticed that the label says “Consulate of Jamaica” immediately above “E&A Scheer,” a curious fact filed away for later.
From the unassuming stoop, we stepped inside the canal house headquarters, first through a narrow hallway with marble floors and carved stone mouldings and into a high-ceilinged reception room. Front and center was an unassuming shelf of rum bottles on display—many of which were brands you’d recognize. We were soon warmly greeted by Hein Smit, the company’s commercial manager, a warm and engaging young man in his early-thirties who projects an air of crisp efficiency. Noticing our interest in the rum bottles, Hein offers that all the rums featured here are either from distillers they purchase from or are customers themselves of E&A Scheer.
My mind quickly went into overdrive, connecting the dots.

“They’re a customer? Wow!”

“Hold on, they’re also a customer? But… but…”

It was the first of many revelatory moments to come.

In short order we were joined by Carsten, who could easily pass muster as a mid-level diplomat or private banker. Younger than you might picture a global rum trader, with a calm assuredness and soothing voice, he is clearly a man who has traveled the world and probably seen it all. It’s easy to imagine he has an endless supply of stories, if you know what to ask.
We follow Carsten and Hein to the rear of the canal house and down a small set of stairs to a kitchen, which doubles as a meeting room. Carved wood and glass doors open to a lush courtyard garden, just beginning to awaken to early spring. A replica of wooden 18th-century trading ship is perched on one side of the room—a gentle reminder that this company has seen more than all of us ever will. Over strong coffee in delicate cups, we chatted in earnest about our backgrounds and people we knew in common. Eventually Carsten asked me what I knew of their operations. Having scoured their web site several times, I rambled for a few minutes, believing I’d done a fairly good job. Carsten smiled and said I’d covered about twenty percent of what they do. Hmm…

To bring us up to speed on the other 80 percent, Hein brought out a tablet computer and went through the same presentation we’d likely get as a prospective customer. A company motto, shared on their website, says simply, “First we ask, then we act.” Among the new things I learned:

- In addition to importing, blending and selling rums from Amsterdam, the company also owns the Main Rum Company, located in Liverpool, England. While the Amsterdam operation focuses on younger rums and blending, the Main Rum Company (a 2001 acquisition) focuses on older, vintage rums (usually casked, not bulk) in smaller quantities. Rum residing in Amsterdam rests in neutral containers, so products don’t age any further or change flavor profile, whereas the Main Rum Company’s stocks are allowed to continue to age in barrels prior to being sold.
- Batavia Arrack, a sugarcane distillate from the Indonesian island of Java (previously a Dutch
colony involved in the East Indies trade), was once the main driver of their business. The company still buys and sells it, although worldwide demand has waned. A key difference between Batavia Arrack and rum is that Batavia Arrack uses red rice as a starter in the fermentation process. It’s a challenging mix of flavors, including high-ester funk with a slight petrol afterburn.

- The twenty-plus countries from which E&A Scheer purchases distillate are primarily in the Caribbean, Central America, and Indonesia. A few of these countries have only one or two producers making rum at scale, so it’s easy to guess their sources. Rum from Trinidad? It’s going to be from Trinidad Distillers (aka Angostura). Rum from Panama? There’s very few players in town. From Guyana? Has to be Demerara Distillers Ltd. Barbados, you say? Either Foursquare or West Indies Rum Distillery. Or perhaps both.

- As individual batches of rum from distilleries arrive in Amsterdam, they’re nosed and blended down into 25 or so different intermediate blends. These blends are described with names known only to the blenders—E&A Scheer “marks” so to speak. When creating a new recipe for a customer, the blenders use the set of intermediate blends as building blocks, combined with single source rums in many different proportions.

- Customers can purchase blended rums in quantities as small as 200 liters (~53 gallons) and as large as 25,000 liter (~6,600 gallon) ISO tanks.

- The company sells to four primary industry markets: drinks/spirits, aroma, food, and tobacco. Blended rum and vintage rum (via the Main Rum Company) are subsets of the drinks industry. Scheer also produces blends used as flavor or scent additives in products as varied as candy, perfumes, and cigarettes, for instance.

- Each customer who purchases rum receives a custom-devised recipe meeting their requests and specifications; no two recipes are alike. To reach that end result, customers answer a series of gentle questions meant to guide the direction of the final recipe—factors that matter may be a specific flavor profile (or flavors to avoid), price point, marketing buzzwords, country (or countries) of origin, and desired aged statement. In short, tell them what you want, and they will work to blend it for you. Want your own high-ester funky Jamaican? Or multi-island Caribbean offering? All it takes is a commitment to sixteen gallons.

- Currently E&A Scheer employs around fifteen people, including the warehouse staff. While their offices are in the canal district of central Amsterdam, the warehouses are a few miles away and closer to the seaport. As with most spirit producers these days, regardless of millions of bottles of volume, automation has allowed numbers to settle on fewer staff than you might expect.

Beyond the basics of E&A Scheer’s core business, the conversation also wound through topics such as company history, the backgrounds of Carsten and Hein, and the various rum industry trends. It’s no surprise that the names of Foursquare master distillery Richard Seale and Plantation Rum president Alexandre Gabriel came up in regards to the people at the forefront of the rum industry.
Most interesting is how both Carsten and Hein came to E&A Scheer, respectively. Carsten is the first non-Scheer or Huijsser descendent to run the company in their 250 years of business. He arrived at their doorstep in 1995 with no prior experience with rum or spirits, having previously worked in the hotel industry and in pharmaceuticals. Having been recruited by a headhunter, he learned on the job from his predecessor Jacques Huijsser, and took over the Managing Director reins in 1999. “Captain” Jacques still owns the canal house we visited and lives upstairs, leasing the bottom floor to E&A Scheer for office space. Carsten typically travels one week per month, frequently visiting Caribbean producers. A terrible task, to be sure, but he seems up to the duty. Hein, who is the second nose and now works side by side with Carsten in the blending room, simply answered an ad—and the rest is history.

As the conversation in the kitchen wound down, I broached the subject of the Jamaican Consulate label on the doorbell. It turns out that Carsten also functions as the honorary consul for Jamaica in Amsterdam, helping travelers and residents with passports, travel issues, and so forth. If you buy a lot of rum from Jamaica, it probably makes good sense to house their consulate, too.
Hein Smit preparing some samples for nosing at E&A Scheer
Of course, no visit to the home of E&A Scheer would be complete without spending time in the small nosing room, where much of the work of creating blend recipes for customers takes place. The room, albeit small and unassuming, is a sight to behold. The roughly 10×12 room has work counters and shelves on three sides, and a small internal window on the fourth; the usual workplace post-its and cartoons are tacked to the walls. In the center is a large work table with a spine of shelves reaching to the ceiling; hundreds of small sample bottles fill every square inch of shelf space. While most of the bottles look new and have a standard issue E&A Scheer label, hand written in a cryptic code, there’s a smattering of small dusty bottles, bearing dates as far back as 1955, 1919, and 1891. This is truly a rum nerd’s paradise of rare and forgotten rums.
Seriously old rum sample bottles at E&A Scheer
Also present are a few dozen bottles of regular, consumer brands. Hein explains that when working to craft a unique recipe, customers will often reference commercially available rums that they enjoy or want to differ from. Here in the E&A Scheer nosing room, these rums serve as a working reference library.

Both Carsten and Hein work on tailoring the blend components to a given customer's liking. On the counter are reference bottles of several popular brands associated with countries such as Trinidad, Peru, and the Dominican Republic. Earlier Hein had been working on a recipe for a customer who'd cited these rums as having characteristics they were looking for. At one point in the conversation, which touched on the often controversial topics of sugar and other additives present in major rum brands, Carsten reached for a well-known non-blended aged white rum (name withheld to protect the guilty), nosed it briefly, and declared that it indeed contained a flavoring additive (not sugar) to give its distinctive flavor. The flavor additive—a surprise to me—was not something I would have been able to discern myself, but as they say, the nose knows.
Valhalla of Funk – DOK rum from Jamaica

As Hein poured out six or seven different samples from the small bottles into nosing glasses, he described a bit about them in turn. Each is an example of their intermediate blends. I quickly realized that (at least in the early stages) the blender’s job is much more nosing than tasting. Mrs. Wonk and I didn’t sip any of the samples, but I was sorely tempted! The highlight of the samples we tried wasn’t a blend, but instead was Hampden DOK rum – the highest ester, funkiest Jamaican rum on the planet. In terms of ester PPM, it blows away anything else you’ve ever had, and has been described as undrinkable in its pure form. It’s used as a component in blends to add...
a big slug of esters. What an experience!

As far as I’m aware, no brands other than the aforementioned Denizen state outright that they source from E&A Scheer. But if you’re inquisitive and know what you’re looking for, you can make solid guesses. For this task, it’s helpful to break down rum brands into four categories, with a few examples of each:

- Brands that create their own rum: Bacardi, Appleton, El Dorado.
- Private label brands that specify a source distillery: Cana Brava, Real McCoy, Afrohead.
- Private label brands that don’t specify a source distillery: Banks, Pusser’s, Papa’s Pilar.
- Independent bottlers: Mezan, Plantation, Berry Bros. & Rudd, Velier, Bristol Classic Rums.

We can immediately eliminate the first two categories – we know (in theory) who made those rums, and presumably they don’t go through an intermediate company like E&A Scheer. It’s the latter two categories that are of interest. Let’s start with the private label brands that don’t specify which distillery the rum comes from.

It’s not a stretch to guess that Banks Rum (they of the 5 Island and 7 Golden Age expressions) source from E&A Scheer. There’s a ton of circumstantial evidence – several web sites state that Banks is blended in Amsterdam, for example, and Scheer is the only player in town. More telling is that the stated Master Blender is Arnaud de Trabac, an executive at CL World Brands, which was the parent company of E&A Scheer before the time when Banks came to market. Also, one of the
five components of Banks is Batavia Arrack, which is something E&A Scheer (and very few other companies) specializes in.

A telling marker on a given rum bottle or marketing blurbs is the phrase “Blended in Amsterdam.” There’s exactly one rum blender in Amsterdam. Thus, if a brand’s web site or marketing blurbs include that phrase, you’ve likely got a match. There are at least two examples that you can find with a targeted Google search. The first is The Duppy Share, a UK-based brand composed of Jamaican and Barbados rum. If “Blended in Amsterdam” wasn’t a big enough clue, the presence of a Duppy Share bottle on the E&A Scheer reception shelves should make it quite clear.

The Batavia Arrack van Oosten from Haus Alpenz is a second example that discloses its background via “Blended in Amsterdam.” It’s not surprising at all, given that E&A Scheer have specialized in Batavia Arrack for hundreds of years. A third example, which I discovered firsthand while in Scotland, is a supermarket “house” rum from UK-based chain Co-operative Food. I spied the telltale “Blended in Amsterdam” phrase on the back of a bottle while prowling the rum selection at a small supermarket on Islay. (Hunting for rum on Islay, ground zero for peated Scotch whisky? He’s a bit of an odd one, eh? But never one to let a booze shopping opportunity pass unnoticed.)

Another likely clue that a rum is from E&A Scheer is a blend of rums from several countries. Realistically, there are very few private label rum brands who can afford to undergo the effort to source from two or more distilleries in different countries and then blend batches themselves. It’s just too much work and too much liability. I’ve already mentioned Banks and Denizen; who else has a multi-country blend? When I think about blended rums, several big players come to mind. Two are Plantation 3 Stars, and Pusser’s. Might they contain some or all E&A Scheer-sourced components? I wouldn’t rule it out.

Another recently released multi-island rum is Gunroom Navy Rum, from Sweden. Like Banks, Gunroom is a blend from five different countries (Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, and “secret origin”). The first four countries just so happen to match up with four of the five countries comprising Banks Five Island. Could “secret origin” actually be Java, as in Batavia Arrack – the fifth component in Banks Five Island? It’s entirely circumstantial, but I’d bet on it—and that the Gunroom is sourced from E&A Scheer.

As for independent bottlers, there’s quite a few great brands, including:

- Mezan
- Bristol Classic Rum
- Velier
- Rum Nation
- Berry Bros. & Rudd
The romantic notion is that maverick independent bottlers are scouring distilleries of the Caribbean and Central America, finding and purchasing vintage casks and bringing them to waiting rum aficionados the world over. While that may be true to a large degree, it's not always the complete story. I'm not making any particular claim here, but we figured out that at least a few the above independent bottlers might source at least some of their rums from E&A Scheer and/or the Main Rum company. Surprising at first, but it makes sense.

You might ask, why is this important? Why, as a rum drinker, should I care? First, E&A Scheer is a great story: A small, family-run company, around for 250 years, is now an integral part of the global rum business with vast reserves of rum from all over the world, and a duo of Dutch blenders are shaping the taste of an industry from a tiny blending room in Amsterdam.

Second, E&A Scheer provides a huge benefit for us rum lovers who value a diverse ecosystem of many different distilleries and styles. For small distilleries, profit margins are thin, so it's vital to sell as much rum as you can make to remain financially viable. As Carsten explained it, most small distilleries can make far more than they can sell on their own—either due to the size of their own labels or distribution channels or because of aging requirements or angels' share losses that often delay profits on current production. E&A Scheer purchases rum from these producers in bulk for its various blends, providing valuable cash flow that small distilleries couldn't easy tap into otherwise.

Finally, there is transparency and understanding where your spirits come from. In some ways, the fact that E&A Scheer supplies to many brands is similar to the recent story about how many American bourbon and rye brands all source from the same contract distillery in Indiana. This is no way maligning what E&A Scheer do–quite the opposite in fact. Their expertise and rum reserves allow many high quality expressions that would otherwise be much less likely to exist. A win for rum fans everywhere.

If you truly care about what you're drinking, it's worth knowing the path your rum takes from cane to glass. Ed Hamilton, with his Ministry of Rum line, has taken transparency to an extreme, providing detailed background on the what, when, and where of each of his single-producer bottlings. My goal in writing about E&A Scheer in-depth is to provide a similar level of transparency to a different but equally vital part of the global rum trade.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank Carsten and Hein for their time and giving us great access to this
little known part of the rum world. I’d also like to thank my friend Peter Holland from The Floating Rum Shack for making the initial introduction that lead to our visit.
9 THOUGHTS ON “THE MOST IMPORTANT RUM COMPANY YOU’VE NEVER HEARD OF:

E&A SCHEER – RUM MERCHANTS TO THE WORLD”

Francesco
FEBRUARY 19, 2016 AT 3:07 AM
Our compliments. An article really fantastic.

Cyril
FEBRUARY 19, 2016 AT 10:33 AM
That was really interesting, thank you. That should make sense to any rum lovers

The Lone Caner
FEBRUARY 19, 2016 AT 8:41 PM
Great article

Cornelius
FEBRUARY 20, 2016 AT 1:10 AM
Great writing, thank you!

SK
FEBRUARY 24, 2016 AT 9:56 AM
good article. Can we have one on the main rum company as well pls?

★ mpietrek
FEBRUARY 24, 2016 AT 10:21 PM
Would love to! Just need to visit them some day!

Mark Theron
MARCH 11, 2016 AT 7:04 AM
Great article, full of good info, I look forward to more of your articles.

Laurent
MARCH 18, 2016 AT 10:01 AM
Hi there
I finally read this article so I wanted to thank you for it. Really interesting and on a rarely
discussed topic.
Cheers

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