

CLAIRIN

The Spirit of Haiti

Bethel Romelus

LE
ROCHER
Distillerie

MATH 7:24-27
LUC



WHAT IS CLAIRIN TRADITIONNEL?

Clairin Traditionnel represents an unwavering commitment to ancestral production methods and the dedicated producers who uphold them.



This standard begins in the fields with the cultivation of non-hybridized, heirloom sugarcane varieties grown through chemical-free agriculture and sustainable organic farming practices that eschew synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. The transformation from juice to spirit relies exclusively on spontaneous fermentation via wild, ambient yeasts without any industrial intervention. Finally, the process is completed through traditional distillation, utilizing batch stills and centuries-old techniques to ensure the liquid remains a pure reflection of its heritage.

Pignon

A SHORT HISTORY

HISTORY

Pignon sits in the Nord department of Haiti, a landscape defined by the rugged beauty of the Massif du Nord. While many coastal Haitian towns grew around colonial ports, Pignon's identity is anchored in the rolling hills and the resilient agricultural traditions of the interior. Historically, the region served as a crossroads for farmers and traders moving between the northern plains and the Central Plateau. It is a place where the rhythm of life has long been dictated by the soil and the seasons, maintaining a certain rugged independence from the more urbanized hubs of the country.

The town's narrative is deeply intertwined with the production of sugarcane, which thrives in the valley's unique microclimate. Unlike the industrial-scale plantations seen elsewhere, Pignon's agriculture has remained largely artisanal, characterized by small-scale "guildives" or distilleries. This deep-rooted connection to the land survived the various political and economic shifts of the 20th century, preserving a traditional way of life that feels both timeless and defiant.



LAND

The landscape of Pignon is a dramatic departure from the sun-bleached coastal plains typically associated with the Caribbean. Tucked into the foothills of the Massif du Nord, the terrain is a rolling tapestry of deep greens and rich, volcanic reds. The rolling hills are a series of fertile ridges and valleys that trap moisture moving off the northern coast, creating a microclimate that feels more temperate and lush than the arid lowlands. This elevation provides a natural drainage system, which is essential for the health of the crops, preventing the soil from becoming waterlogged during the intense tropical rains.



Barradères

THE TERROIR



SOIL

The soil profile is dominated by Vertisols, often referred to locally as "black summer" earth, which are rich in clay and organic matter. These soils are famously temperamental—they shrink and crack during the dry season, then expand and become incredibly dense when the rains arrive. This constant movement self-plows the earth, bringing deep minerals to the surface. Interspersed with these clays are pockets of Ferralsols, characterized by their high iron and aluminum content, which give the hillsides their deep, oxidized red hue. This mineral intensity is what defines the local agriculture; it forces the sugarcane to struggle slightly, concentrating the brix levels and imbuing the eventual Clairin with that distinct, savory earthiness that defines the Pignon terroir.

ELEVATION

The geography of Pignon is defined by its position in the trough between the Massif du Nord and the Plateau Central. This creates a unique catch-basin for mineral deposits. The land here is a series of undulating folds where the elevation fluctuates enough to create distinct drainage patterns. Because the region sits at a higher altitude than the coastal plains, the soil isn't subjected to the same salt-spray or sandy erosion. Instead, it is a heavy, structured earth that has been cooked by the sun and compressed by centuries of traditional polyculture



Barradères

BON CLAIRIN BEGINS IN THE FIELDS



CANE FIELDS

In Pignon, sugarcane is the heartbeat of the local economy. Unlike the massive, monoculture plantations seen in other Caribbean nations, the landscape here is a patchwork of small-holdings. Sugarcane grows alongside coffee, cocoa, and fruit trees, creating a diverse ecosystem that protects the soil from exhaustion. Because the terrain is so rugged and the plots are tucked into the folds of the hills, industrial machinery is practically non-existent. The harvest is a communal, manual labor of love, where the rhythmic sound of machetes clearing the fields echoes the same traditions practiced for over two centuries.



CANNE HAWAII ROUGE & BLANC

At Le Rocher, the agricultural strategy is one of intentional diversity. While much of the industrial world has moved toward high-yield hybrids, Bethel Romelus anchors his production in three traditional, non-hybridized varieties that have adapted to the rocky Pignon soil over generations. These are not just different plants; they are different flavor precursors that survive the boiling process to define the final spirit.

Pete Koka is the backbone of Le Rocher's structure. It is a hardy, traditional variety known for its resilience in the rugged terrain of the Nord department. In the glass, Pete Koka is often credited with providing the deep, earthy base and the savory weight that grounds the more volatile aromatic notes. It handles the high-mineral content of the Vertisols (the heavy clay) exceptionally well, pulling those metallic and stony qualities into its fibers.

Canne Blanc & Negra (White and Black Cane) are also used. These varieties act as the high-toned counterpoint and are prized for their high sugar content and cleaner, more floral aromatic profile.

The Farmer Distiller

BETHEL ROMELUS



Bethel learned the craft from his father and grandfather. In their time, making Clairin was a necessity of mountain life, a way to transform a perishable crop (sugarcane) into a stable, tradable commodity. He grew up in the rhythmic cycle of the harvest: the smell of woodsmoke from the batterie, the sound of the ox-driven mills, and the patience required for natural fermentation.

Bethel doesn't just grow these varieties; he manages them in a strict polyculture system. By growing Canne Pete Koka, Blanc and Negra in close proximity to other fruit and spice plants, he encourages a healthy ecosystem where the cane doesn't require chemical intervention.

The magic happens when these three distinct profiles are harvested by hand and combined in the batterie (the series of open-fire cauldrons). As the juice from these three varieties boils together to form the syrup, their individual sugars and minerals concentrate, creating a master blend of raw material that is far more complex than any single-variety juice could produce.

Bethel Romelus

LE ROCHER, THE ROCK



The name Le Rocher is far more than a geographical marker; it is a profound statement of character and spiritual resilience that mirrors the biblical parable of the wise and foolish builders. In the Gospel of Matthew, the wise man builds his house upon the rock, and when the rain falls, the floods come, and the winds blow, the house stands because it is founded upon a firm foundation. The foolish man, conversely, builds upon the sand, and his structure is swept away by the first sign of instability.

In the context of Pignon, this metaphor is literal and lived. The distillery is physically perched upon a massive, outcropping rock—a limestone "shield" that defines the family's land. In a country that has faced centuries of literal and metaphorical storms—from the devastating hurricanes that batter the Nord department to the shifting sands of political and economic upheaval—Bethel Romelus and his ancestors chose the rock. By building the distillery on this stony foundation, they signaled an intent for permanence. While other producers might have moved toward the "sifting sands" of industrial efficiency, high-yield additives, or modern shortcuts to chase a quick profit, the Romelus lineage remained anchored to the difficult, stony path of tradition.



From Field to Spirit

THE GROWING SEASON

March to April

PLANTING AND THE GRAND PRINTEMPS

Planting typically aligns with the Grand Printemps (the primary wet season) which begins in late March or April. As the rains soften the heavy, clay-rich Vertisols, farmers begin the manual process of stick-planting cane cuttings. Because Pignon's terrain is so uneven, there are no tractors to furrow the earth; instead, the soil is prepared with hand tools to avoid over-compacting the delicate volcanic structure. This timing ensures the young cane stalks have ample moisture to establish deep root systems before the heat of the summer intensifies.

Through Summer to October

THE GROWTH PHASE AND SAISON DES PLUIES

Throughout the summer and into the second rainy season in October, the cane undergoes a period of rapid vertical growth. In Pignon's polyculture fields, the cane is shaded by mango and citrus trees, which helps regulate ground temperature and prevents the soil from drying out too quickly during mid-summer dry spells. This is a period of quiet stewardship—weeding is done by hand, and the biodiversity of the plots naturally manages pests without chemical intervention.



From Field to Spirit

THE GROWING SEASON (CONT.)

January to April

THE HARVEST: LA COUPE

The harvest, or La Coupe, typically runs from January through April, coinciding with the driest months of the year. This timing is critical for two reasons:

Brix Concentration: The lack of rain causes the sugarcane to stress, which naturally concentrates the sucrose levels (Brix) within the stalk.

Accessibility: The rugged mountain paths and the "Rock" itself become nearly impassable for ox-carts during the mud-heavy rainy season. The dry winter ensures the cane can be transported from the high-altitude folds of the hills down to the mill.

Year Round

PRODUCTION

Because Bethel uses the sirop de canne to produce his Clairin, the end of the harvest doesn't mean the end of distillation. While fresh-juice producers must shut down the moment the last cane is cut, Bethel's ability to store his boiled syrup allows Le Rocher to continue fermenting and distilling even as the first rains of the next Grand Printemps begin to fall. This overlap ensures a steady presence in the community and a spirit that carries the concentrated energy of the entire previous year's sun.



From Field to Spirit

SIROP DE CANNE

The batterie is the heart of the Le Rocher distillery, a row of open-fire cauldrons that represents a dramatic departure from Clairin made with fresh juice. Bethel Romelus uses heat to arrest time, concentrating the essence of Pignon into a shelf-stable, high-density syrup.

The Architecture of the Batterie

The setup consists of a series of four to five large cast-iron or copper bowls, graduated in size, built into a brick and stone furnace. This is the Equipage. A single fire, fueled by bagasse (the dried, crushed remains of the sugarcane stalks), is lit at one end. The heat travels under the entire row, creating a temperature gradient that the Maître Sucrier must manage with rhythmic precision.

The Clarification

Raw, green cane juice enters the first, largest kettle. As it heats, impurities and proteins rise to the surface as a thick foam. These are skimmed off by hand using long-handled ladles, ensuring that only the purest sugars remain.

The Reduction

The juice is ladled from one kettle to the next, becoming progressively thicker and darker as the water evaporates. This is where the Maître Sucrier's skill is tested; they must judge the density by the way the bubbles break and how the liquid sheets off the ladle.

Caramelization and Maillard Reactions

The intense heat of the open flame against the metal causes complex chemical reactions. The sugars begin to lightly caramelize, and the minerals from the Pignon soil—the iron and lime—interact with the heat to create savory, toasted aromatic precursors that doesn't exist in raw juice.

The Transformation into Sirop

By the time the liquid reaches the final, smallest kettle (the sirupier), it has been transformed into a dense, mahogany-colored sirop. This syrup is a concentrated expression of the harvest.

While fresh juice is fragile and prone to wild acetic spikes, this syrup is stable. Bethel can store it, allowing him to manage his fermentation schedule with intent rather than urgency. This concentration is why Le Rocher possesses its signature weight—the chewy texture and the deep, savory umami notes are born in the intense heat of the batterie long before they ever reach the still.

From Field to Spirit

DUNDER-NEATH IT ALL



The transition from the boiling cauldrons to the fermentation vats is where the "Spirit of Haiti" truly takes shape. Because Bethel works with a dense syrup rather than fresh juice, the fermentation doesn't just start on its own; it requires a deliberate reawakening. This is achieved through a technique that bridges the gap between traditional Haitian Clairin and the high-ester Grand Arôme rums of Jamaica.

In the back of the distillery, Bethel maintains a living repository of flavor. When the concentrated syrup is ready, it is diluted with water and—crucially—a portion of stillage (the spent wash left over from the previous distillation), often referred to in the Jamaican rum lexicon as “dunder.”

Dunder is packed with dead yeast cells, organic acids, and concentrated minerals from the Pignon soil. By adding this back into the fresh syrup, Bethel isn't just recycling; he is seeding the new batch with the DNA of every batch that came before it.

Le Rocher relies on ambient, wild yeasts and the complex bacterial colonies present in the distillery environment. The dunder lowers the pH, creating an acidic environment where specific flavor-creating bacteria thrive, while unwanted bacteria are kept at bay.

Fermentation at Le Rocher takes patience: while most spirits are fermented in a few days maximum, Bethel's wash can sit for ten days to two weeks. This extended timeline allows for an advanced esterification process as wild yeast slowly consumes the complex sugars of the syrup and the organic acids from the dunder react with the alcohol. This reaction creates esters—the chemical compounds responsible for the explosive aromatic profile of the spirit.

From Field to Spirit

FERMENTATION

PROCESS

Fermentation at Le Rocher is an untamed, atmospheric process. Once the concentrated cane sirop is rehydrated, it is left in open-top wooden vats to be fermented naturally by the heavy, humid air of the Pignon valley. No commercial yeast is pitched, instead the wash relies entirely on a diverse community of indigenous, wild yeast strains and lactic acid bacteria that have lived in the rafters of the distillery for generations. This results in an incredibly slow, tumultuous biological dance that can last up to ten days. During this time, the ambient microbes feast on the complex sugars and minerals of the sirop, undergoing a deep esterification that transforms the liquid from a sweet base into a pungent, high-acid wash. It is this specific, unhurried wild fermentation that yields the signature savory character that defines the Le Rocher profile.



From Field to Spirit

DISTILLATION



PROCESS

Bethel uses a discontinuous pot still—a setup that is designed specifically to capture the heavy concentration of esters developed during the long fermentation.

The distillation setup at Le Rocher is a beautiful bit of engineering that feels more like a 19th-century workshop than a modern factory. Like many producers in Haiti, Bethel uses a chauffe-vin, or pre-heater. Borrowed from the traditional methods of Cognac, this large vessel sits between the pot and the condenser. Instead of wasting energy, Bethel pumps the cold, fermented wash into this tank first. As the hot alcoholic vapors travel from the boiling pot toward the condenser, they pass through a coil inside the chauffe-vin, preheating the raw wash to near-boiling before it ever touches the still. It's a brilliant bit of old-world efficiency—powered by the dried sugarcane husks (bagasse) used for the fire—that allows the next batch to start almost instantly once the still is charged.

CLAIRIN

The Spirit of Haiti

The Spirit of Haiti is a dedicated collective focused on preserving the ancestral production of Clairin, the traditional agricultural spirit that has defined Haitian village life for centuries. By partnering with small-scale master distillers, the company celebrates the savoir-faire of the producers and their commitment to organic farming of heirloom cane, spontaneous wild-yeast fermentation, and artisanal distillation. This initiative serves as a vital bridge between Haiti's rural agricultural heritage and the global stage, ensuring that each bottle remains an unadulterated, still-strength expression of the island's diverse micro-terroirs and sovereign craftsmanship.

CLAIRIN LE ROCHER

Producer Name:	Bethel Romelus
Village:	Pignon
Raw material:	Sugarcane juice
Cane type:	Pete Koka, Blanc & Negra
Fermentation:	Natural with ambient yeast
Distillation:	Pot still
Bottling Strength:	50.39% abv

Crafted by Bethel Romelus in the village of Pignon, Le Rocher is produced using sirop de canne. This syrup is created by gently boiling the fresh juice of three distinct sugarcane varieties, a process that preserves the raw character of the material for year-round production.

The fermentation follows a tradition similar to Grand Arôme, where the residual liquid from previous distillations—known as dunder or backset—is added back to the wash. This technique fosters an incredible intensity of aromatic compounds, resulting in a finished spirit defined by heavy richness and an intriguing, smoky sweetness. The bottle is distinguished by artwork originally found on the walls of the historic Hotel Florita in Jacmel.

TASTING NOTES

Nose: The nose is immediately dominated by a profound industrial and mineral smoke, reminiscent of flint, campfire embers, and hot asphalt. Beneath the smoke lies a surprising sweetness of crème brûlée and toasted marshmallow, balanced by earthy notes of wet clay and dried tobacco leaf.

Palate: On the palate, the spirit is rich and viscous. The initial taste is a savory blend of salted licorice and roasted nuts, which quickly gives way to a deep, resinous smokiness. It has a distinct weight to it, with flavors of dark honey and caramelized sugar that provide a sturdy backbone to the more volatile, smoky elements.

Finish: The finish is persistent and remarkably dry. It leaves a lasting impression of soot, graphite, and cracked black pepper, with a faint, sweet echo of molasses. It is a powerful, architectural finish that reflects the "rock" for which it is named.



WATCH DISTILLERY TOUR

From Field to Spirit **DISTILLATION** (CONT.)

Perched just aside to the pot still is a short external column, which is not to be mistaken for a modern industrial column designed for purity (there's no interest in stripping away flavor here). With only a few plates, this column is built for texture and control and allows the Clairin to come off the still at a final abv of 45% - 55% after a single pass, ensuring all those oily, savory minerals from the syrup and dunder shine in the bottle.

Everything here is heated by direct fire. This creates hot spots in the pot that lightly scorch any unfermented sugars, adding a subtle, ashy smokiness to the final spirit. Once the liquid is collected, it remains still proof with no dilution. To sip Le Rocher is to sip a spirit that is raw, heavy, and unabashedly itself.



SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability at Le Rocher is the natural byproduct of a production model that has remained unchanged for over a century. In the rugged, self-reliant landscape of Pignon, efficiency is born from necessity rather than a mandate. The result is a closed-loop system defined by a profound respect for the area and a refusal to waste any resource the land provides.

The Cycle: From Field to Furnace

The operation functions as a study in circularity, where the sugarcane provides both the raw material for the spirit and the energy required to produce it:

- **Renewable Energy:** After the cane is pressed, the fibrous byproduct (bagasse) is sun-dried and repurposed as the primary fuel for the distillery's furnace. This biomass powers the batterie for syrup reduction and heats the pot still, allowing the distillery to operate almost entirely on its own organic waste.
- **Nutrient Restoration:** Following distillation, the mineral-rich liquid remaining in the pot—the stillage or dunder—is never treated as waste. Instead, it is used to dilute the syrup adding rich microbiome to the wash and also integrated with compost and returned to the fields. This practice naturally replenishes the volcanic soil, nourishing subsequent generations of cane without the use of synthetic fertilizers.

Ecological Stewardship

Bethel Romelus maintains an agricultural system that is organic by default. The cane is cultivated within a diverse polyculture, growing alongside mango, banana, and citrus trees. This biodiversity serves as a natural pest management system and preserves soil health, eliminating the need for chemical pesticides. Furthermore, because the steep terrain precludes the use of heavy machinery, the harvest remains a manual, low-impact process that keeps the distillery's carbon footprint remarkably low.

Social and Cultural Longevity

The sustainability of Le Rocher extends to the Pignon community itself. By intentionally preserving labor-intensive, artisanal methods over automation, Bethel maintains the local guildive heritage and provides consistent, skilled employment. This ensures that the global recognition of Le Rocher translates into direct economic support for the local farmers who steward the land. Ultimately, Le Rocher represents the protection of terroir in its most complete sense: an unwavering commitment to the land, the people, and the heritage that defines them.



CLAIRIN

The Spirit of Haiti



Haiti's spirit landscape is defined by its deep-rooted artisanal heritage, featuring more than 500 small-scale distilleries—known locally as guildives—scattered throughout the countryside. Traditionally, these producers have crafted Clairin (or Kleren) primarily for the enjoyment of their own local villages, resulting in an extraordinary diversity of styles across the island.

Established in 2012, The Spirit of Haiti was founded to celebrate grower-producers of Clairin Traditionnel and support a route to global market.



US National Manager Kate Perry
k.perry@laisonandvelier.com

CLAIRIN

The Spirit of Haiti

www.thespiritofhaiti.com
Instagram @clairinthespiritofhaiti



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info@pmspirits.com