

2007: JOSEPH BENTO "J.B." FERNANDES (1903-1992)

Born on 31st May 1903 Joseph Bento Fernandes, was the first of his family to be born in Trinidad. His grandfather, Manoel Fernandes had migrated to Trinidad in 1880 with his wife Sabina and two children Maria Marta and Jose Gregorio, the father of J.B. Fernandes. After the young Joseph Bento completed his Lyceu in Lisbon, he entered Queen's Royal College and then the Granger's Institute. He subsequently travelled further in Portugal and England before his return home in 1922 to join his father's firm, wholesalers of wines and spirits and to a lesser degree, rum.

At that time Trinidad was gripped by the post-war depression and the family fortunes declined as everyone began to feel the effect of the economic downturn. Joseph Bento, with difficulty, persuaded his father that it might be more beneficial to merchandise their products in a more distinctive way. It was the custom at that time for shopkeepers to purchase casks and puncheons of spirit from certain merchants and sugar factories. These were then aged for a minimum of three years before blending into rum. Most shopkeepers made their own blends in small batches of invariably different rums put into bottles of all shapes and sizes. Joseph Bento reasoned that if Fernandes & Co. standardised the quality of their rum, blended it in larger quantities to uniform procedures and packaged it properly there was a chance that they could enhance their reputation by giving integrity and consistency to their product and his father José Gregorio was prepared to go along. How right they were! The Fernandes products, now more consistent in style and quality grew in popularity; the name became one to trust.

In 1930 Joseph Bento now 27 years old, lost his father. Then in 1932 he seized an opportunity that presented itself after the fire that destroyed the Government Rum Bond. Fernandes & Co. acquired the fire sale stocks of rum for blending at a good price. The Government papers stated that the bulk of the spirit distilled in 1919, was mature and of good quality. The blend made from these stocks was labelled FERNANDES "1919", AGE GUARANTEED". It was the only vintage rum ever made in Trinidad and the forerunner of

the most successful Fernandes brand for thirty years with the name changed to "Fernandes Vat 19" when the original 1919 stock ran out. Though Vat 19 was by far the most widely known of all the Fernandes products, it was not the first. White Star rum was produced as far back as 1918, to be followed in the mid-1920s by Fernandes Black Label rum. Then came Ferdi's, a 10-year-old rum in the mid-1930s and eventually White Star and Crystal White.

Joseph Bento was weary of being tied to the sugar estates for his supply of raw material. In 1933 he succeeded in raising sufficient funds to acquire the then derelict sugar factory Forres Park Estate at Claxton Bay. It took him eight years of tremendous sacrifice and toil, mortgaging every possession, to rebuild Forres Park into an efficient and productive factory. By the end of World War II Forres Park was making one ton of sugar with 8.2 tons of cane - efficiency not achieved today. Meanwhile Joseph Bento tinkered with a wooden still he had at Forres Park; he practiced and honed his hand at distilling and making rums that would be the foundation of his next venture.

The Second World War saw Joseph Bento busy between Henry Street and Forres Park but not so busy that he forgot his countrymen at war in Europe. He decided to send all Trinidadian servicemen a monthly ration of a bottle of Fernandes Vat 19 rum. A small gesture he felt but one that unexpectedly, and in his eyes undeservedly, earned him admiration and eventually a commendation from the Royal Air Force Association.

In the 1940's the business grew tremendously with the arrival of the Americans in Trinidad. Joseph Bento knew he could not rely on the sugar factories to meet his supply needs and the way forward to not only control quality, but also to control production, was to change the business from being blenders and bottlers and to focus on distilling. By the late 1940s, to this end, he started to acquire what was swampy land at the Morvant junction; he had in mind to build a modern distillery with sufficient production and storage capacity for the fast growing demand for his products. He had many detractors who felt that luck had played a large part of his success to date, but he was again to prove them wrong.

By the 1960s Fernandes & Co. had become Fernandes Distillers Ltd., holding the largest stocks of ageing rum in the Caribbean with an unrivalled reputation for quality. With his innate understanding of people and acumen, Joseph Bento personally nurtured the classic blends of the perfectly aged rums that became legendary. By the 1970s Fernandes controlled 85% of the local rum market with exports from Ireland to Japan. His business empire by then included an enormous and unrivalled property portfolio, owning over fifty properties in Port of Spain. In the early 1950s JB, as many fondly knew him, was made Chairman of the Tourist Board and a Director of Queen's Park Hotel Co. Ltd., then a public company but which he subsequently acquired. In 1948 he was made Honorary Consul for Portugal until 1963 and on retiring the Portuguese Government decorated him with the 'Ordem Militar de Cristo'. He was Chairman of the Union Club from 1962 to 1968.

The young man who went into his father's modest business at the age of 19 in the depth of the depression, brought to the job a sense of orderliness, a passion for detail and the capacity for hard work. Joseph Bento Fernandes was an extremely private man with a modesty that belied his significant business achievements; an outstanding personality in agricultural, industrial and commercial pursuits; a leader in Trinidad sugar, rum and spirit industries. He was legendary in being as difficult as he was generous; one of Trinidad's foremost philanthropists, an art collector and keen race horse owner. He sponsored countless individuals to study abroad as well as a wide variety of charities, schools, medical facilities and needy causes in Trinidad and Tobago and his father's homeland, Madeira. He shunned the spotlight, striving for anonymity in donations.

He died on Saturday 19th December 1992 leaving his widow Maria Manuela, a sister Lucinda, four children and six grand-children to mourn their loss.

Today the Joseph B. Fernandes Memorial Trusts and the Fernandes Foundation continue

the important humanitarian works he had done all his life in helping those in need.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Joseph Bento Fernandes (posthumously) into the Business Hall of Fame on this 23rd November, 2007.