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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Team](#)
- [SunStar Strategic Services](#)
- [Guest Bloggers Welcome](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

[Search](#)

[Home](#)

When Life Hands You Salt Water, Make Vodka

[Home](#) / [When Life Hands You Salt Water, Make Vodka](#)



When Life Hands You Salt Water, Make Vodka

Posted on: [05-19-2014](#) by: [Katie Bird](#)

Any business that incorporates sustainable practices gets a gold star in our book. But a solar powered vodka distillery using organic sugar cane and deep ocean mineral water? Bring out the gold medal, because that sounds like a winning combination to us. Hawaii-based Ocean Vodka is the mastermind behind this dazzling business, and given its innate intrigue, we caught up with the CEO, Shay Smith, to answer our most burning questions.



Shay Smith, CEO

1) **How did Ocean Vodka come to be? And why vodka?**

In 2005, my family was talking about different new consumer businesses we could start based here on Maui, where the ingredients could be locally grown and the product could compete globally on quality. We decided on vodka because we knew it would be innovative to distill vodka from sugar cane, which grows abundantly on the island of Maui (also, making vodka is almost as fun as drinking it!). We realized we had an excellent water source in Kona, where our partner makes Mahalo drinking water out of deep ocean mineral water. We struck up an exclusive deal to use their water in our vodka, and Ocean Vodka was born.

2) **What drove your focus on sustainable practices? Was it a challenging business decision?**

Growing up on an island, we have always lived this way. Taking care of the earth is in our DNA. We actually find it is MORE cost effective in many ways to farm organically, use solar power and employ green business practices whenever possible.

3) **What sustainable practices do you follow currently and hope to follow in the future?**



Distillery solar panels

We farm organically without the use of pesticides or herbicides. We run our operations 100% on solar. We actually are connected to the grid and send more power back to the grid than we consume. We use recycled

materials for production whenever possible, as well as employ recycling on the property. We also have a deep water fresh well that drops 1,100 feet to a fresh water aquifer that is continually replenished by the rainfall up in the mountains and filtered through lava rock. We plan to use this fresh water at our facility for drinking, cleaning and other purposes instead of municipal water.

4) Tell us about your production process.

We grow our organic sugar cane, hand harvest the stocks and press them into juice which is fermented into a sweet wine (low alcohol) in fermenters. Then this new alcohol is run through our 60 foot tall column still continuously for 2 weeks through more than 100 metal platelets. Each plate acts as a mini-distillation, so the resulting spirit is completely free of impurities and is 193 Proof or higher. We then cut our spirit to 80 Proof Vodka using the deep ocean mineral water, which is sourced from 3,000 feet below the Kona Coast of the Big Island of Hawaii.

5) When people think ocean water, they think salty– how is your water different and how do you extract it from 3,000 feet down?

We use deep ocean mineral water that is desalinated using a proprietary organic filtration process. This allows the removal of salt without removing other naturally occurring minerals that we want to retain in our vodka. Ocean Vodka contains trace calcium, magnesium and potassium from our deep ocean water, which is critical to our flavor profile and gives our vodka a taste like no other. The minerals in our deep ocean water actually act like a seasoning agent when you make a cocktail, yielding a better tasting drink.



A delicious Ocean Vodka cocktail

6) Do you make flavored vodkas? Do you think you'll ever make other spirits?

We do not make any flavored vodkas, as we prefer to mix our vodka with 100% fresh juices and all natural ingredients. Most flavored vodkas are made with artificial flavorings, sweeteners and sugars, which we would never do.

We are considering several new products in the coming year, including a rum and a gin. If we do create a flavored vodka, it will be naturally infused with real ingredients.

7) Tell us about your facility—and what a martini garden is!

We have a beautiful 80 acre organic farm and craft distillery located in Upcountry Kula, about 1,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean. Our Craft distillery is state of the art, allowing for the highest quality, most refined

spirits in the world. We planted our “Martini Garden” just for that purpose: we encourage our guests to pick a fresh sprig of basil or lavender and muddle it into one of their cocktails.

8) **Where can people find your vodka?**

We are distributed in 34 states and Alberta, Canada. I encourage you to visit oceanvodka.com and click on “Find Ocean”. All you do is input your zip, and the closest stores pop up on a map.

9) **In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge facing the renewable energy industry today?**



Inside the bottling room

Public funding and general skepticism about efficacy, but this is improving each year.

10) **What has been the biggest success to date for the renewable energy industry?**

The development of new technologies by entrepreneurs that allow a realistic development and responsible commercialization of renewable energy, such as Elon Musk and the Tesla.

11) **Who do you admire most in the renewable industry and why?**

I have been very impressed with Larry Ellison’s vision for the island of Lanai. He has already made a tremendous positive impact there in the spirit of creating a self-sustaining eco-system with no need for off-island inputs. His goal is for Lanai to be a model for the world. He is working on organic farming, solar, wind and desalinated ocean water projects.

We loved learning about Ocean Vodka and their eco-friendly practices—and now we all want to jump on a plane to Hawaii to try some delicious cocktails. Who’s with us?

To learn more about Ocean Vodka, visit their [website](#).

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