

KULA SPIRITS

A Maui family applies farm-to-table techniques to its production of vodka

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KULA, MAUI >> Ocean Vodka isn't just a smooth, clean-tasting spirit made on Maui with organic cane sugar — it's a destination.

The Maui family that has been bottling the vodka for seven years is moving its operations from the Kahului industrial area to 80 acres of former pasture land on the lower slopes of Haleakala, where it is growing USDA-certified organic sugar cane and setting up a craft distillery.

A state-of-the-art distillation system, bottling equipment and corporate offices will be consolidated in a 6,000-square-foot building on the property, and in April, Ocean Vodka Organic Farm & Distillery will join Hawaii's agricultural tourism sector, offering tours, a gift shop and a "martini garden" that will highlight fresh, local ingredients such as Kula lavender, passion fruit, pineapple, strawberries and citrus.

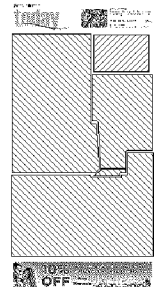
Ocean Vodka already has tapped into the tourist market, and has been the exclusive vodka served on Hawaiian Airlines since 2007. The brand is available in 30 states and in Canada, and now the company wants to raise its profile among Hawaii consumers.

"We've already got a good market with tourists, hotels and the airlines, but we're a local product," said Shay Smith, president and CEO. "We're hoping locals will support locals."

Liquor distilling isn't part of the Smith family heritage, but that's not to say clan members don't enjoy throwing back a drink or two when the occasion calls for it. In fact, it was a taste for the finer things and Maui's deep agricultural roots that got Smith, his parents Kyle and Diana Smith, and brother Sye Vasquez thinking about branching out.

"We're a hardworking family, and we like sitting around the table relaxing — washing off the

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dirt of the day and getting ready for the next day," he said.

Please see VODKA, D8

Smith has been involved in affordable housing developments on Maui, and his father is a longtime builder of custom homes.

"We have three generations of family here, and our background has been more in construction," Smith said. "We were looking to create a value-added agricultural product and played around with different ideas, and this was a nice one that allowed us to go out and promote Hawaii around the world."

Vodka has become the best-selling spirit in the United States. Even though it is without a distinctive aroma, taste or color, not all vodkas are the same. Variations in flavor and character come from the ingredients and the distillation process.

Most vodkas are made from corn, grains such as wheat or rye, potatoes or fruit. During Ocean Vodka's first two years, the company used an organic corn and rye blend grown and distilled on the mainland. The alcohol was shipped to Maui and blended at the Kahului plant with Koyo USA Corp.'s desalinated deep-ocean water from off the Kona Coast.

The Smiths then decided to switch to sugar cane, a crop with a long history on Maui. Lacking a local source of organic cane, the company has been using alcohol distilled from organic sugar grown in South America.

With the move to the Kula property, the Smiths will be taking over all aspects of Ocean Vodka production, from farming to distilling, bottling, marketing and sales. The company employs about a half-dozen people, most of them family.

"Family members pounded the nails (at the new farm), planted the sugar cane, drove the tractors, designed the labels — pretty much everything," Smith said.

Ocean Vodka will harvest its cane by hand — no burning — picking ripe stalks and leaving the younger ones to mature for future harvests. In this way, each plant will continue to yield for eight to 10 years, Smith said.

Until the Kula acreage is in full production, Smith plans to use cane from Kalapana Organics, a family-run farm on Hawaii island.

The cane will be pressed for juice, and yeast added during fermentation to convert the sugar into crude alcohol, a process that takes three to five days — no aging necessary. The alcohol will be put through a four-column distillation system to remove impurities, then blended with water and bottled at 40 percent alcohol — or 80 proof.

A custom-designed distillation system from Vendome Copper & Brass Works Inc. is expected to arrive this month from Kentucky, Smith said.

"It really does produce some of the cleanest spirits in the world. That's the craft of it," he said, producing a highly refined alcohol "while still capturing some of the

flavor so it's just not a neutral taste."

(Expert reviews of Ocean Vodka have cited a pleasant sweetness and earthy mineral notes.)

Once the Ocean Vodka farm and distillery are in full operation, Smith said production will grow from the current 50,000 cases a year to 200,000-plus cases.

Other efforts by Ocean Vodka to run a more sustainable operation include bottles made with about 60 percent recycled glass and 100 percent solar power.

"When you live on an island, you have to get creative to be responsible," Smith said.

Ocean Vodka is available at most grocery, variety and liquor stores; suggested retail price is \$32.99 for 750 milliliters.

OCEAN STRAWBERRY LEMON DROP

2 ounces vodka
1 ounce fresh lemonade
2 ounces fresh strawberry purée
Fresh fruit as desired

In shaker, muddle strawberries into a purée, add other ingredients and bruise (partially crush). Pour into chilled martini glass. Garnish with lemon slice or mint. Serves 1.

OCEAN PINEAPPLE BASIL MARTINI

2 large basil leaves, plus another for garnish
1 ounce simple syrup
2 ounces pineapple juice
2 ounces vodka
1 cup ice

Small pineapple chunk for garnish

Tear basil leaves and place in cocktail shaker. Add simple syrup and muddle basil. Add pineapple juice, vodka and ice. Shake vigorously. Strain into chilled martini glass. Garnish with pineapple and basil leaf. Serves 1.

OCEAN BLUE MILE MARTINI

2 ounces vodka
2 ounces pineapple juice
1 ounce blue Curaçao



Muddled strawberries and lemonade make for a tasty vodka drink.

COURTESY
TRISH BAKER

Place ingredients in shaker over ice and shake vigorously. Strain into chilled martini glass. Garnish with lemon. Serves 1.

OCEAN GINGER LEMONGRASS MARTINI

2 ounces vodka
2 ounces limeade
1/2 ounce fresh lime juice
Diced ginger
Muddled lemongrass

Pour ingredients into shaker over ice. Shake vigorously and pour into chilled martini glass. Garnish with lime twist. Serves 1.



Diana and Kyle Smith, seated, started Ocean Vodka with sons Shay Smith, standing at left, and Sye Vasquez. The family is growing organic sugar cane on 80 acres and is building a solar-powered craft distillery.

PHOTOS COURTESY
KRISTEN HETTERMANN



