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Hawaiians make sugarcane spirit

SPIRITS As sugarcane industry has dwindled, Hawaiians have made it intoxicating

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Drink a cocktail, preserve a way of life: Who knew it was that easy? The producers of two well-regarded Hawaii-made spirits - Maui's Ocean Vodka and Kauai's Koloa Rum Co. - have realized that saying "bottoms up" does more than **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** just help their bottom line. It also supports the 1,500-year-old tradition of growing sugarcane in the islands, and creates agri-tourism on land that might otherwise be lost to development.

The first Polynesian settlers brought *ko*, or sugarcane, to Hawaii in their ocean-voyaging canoes. It didn't become big business, however, until the late 19th century, when local descendants of missionaries and mainland entrepreneurs such as San Francisco's Claus Spreckels created enormous plantations that relied on diverted water and thousands of immigrant workers, from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines and even the Azores and Puerto Rico.

"Hawaii has always been recognized in the sugar industry for producing the highest-quality sugar and sugarcane anywhere in the world," said [Bob Gunter](#), president and CEO of Koloa Rum Co., who left San Francisco years ago to work at the [Lihue Plantation on Kauai](#). "We have ideal conditions, rich volcanic soil, lots of sun and lots of rain, especially here on Kauai, and the sugar plantations were very *akamai* (smart) in developing different varieties that would thrive depending on the field that it was planted in."

But by the mid-2000s, largely because of cheap overseas labor, Gay & Robinson was the lone sugarcane plantation on Kauai, and the industry was in crisis statewide. "There were a group of people that were kicking around the idea of doing something to support the dwindling, severely stressed sugar industry here, and we came up with the idea of doing rum made from local sugarcane," Gunter recalled.

Koloa Rum's distillery began bottling in a jam-making facility in September 2009, when its handsome tasting room in the Kilohana Plantation also opened. Today the tasting room attracts 200 to 300 visitors daily, and its four award-winning rums (four medals at the last World Spirits Competition in San Francisco) are distributed throughout California as well as the islands.

Although Koloa Rum's success was not enough to keep Gay & Robinson in business - Koloa Rum bought the plantation's entire last harvest in 2010, and now supplements it with Maui sugarcane - Gunter said his firm has just started growing its own within the old Koloa Mill. A portable crusher will allow juice to be collected on site, with the crushed cane tilled or composted. "It's very sustainable, and avoids the necessity of processing the cane to make sugar, which is very energy efficient," Gunter noted.

The 7-year-old, family-run Ocean Vodka company, meanwhile, is preparing to open its new farm and distillery in Kula - above the fields of the state's last remaining sugarcane plantation - to the public next month. The site already boasts 22 varieties of organic native sugarcane from Maui Nui Botanical Garden; after learning some of the native Hawaiian legends associated with them, and how the company creates vodka from their sugar and deep-ocean mineral water from the Big Island, visitors who buy some to sample can take advantage of a "martini garden" of organic herbs and fruits.

The site had been planted with cane until about 30 years ago, when it became a cattle ranch, said [Shay Smith](#), the company's president, noting, "That allowed us to get the ranch certified organic." Being organic from the start wasn't a business decision, he added. "Our backyard garden was organic, we fed our kids that way, and when we wanted to develop a product here, we did it knowing that whatever you spray washes into a river and negatively impacts our ocean."



The hint of sweetness to Ocean Vodka, however, was deliberate. "There's no sugar in it, it's just the way we distill it that helps differentiate it," Smith said. "It really is distinctive. That's what we were looking for - a product that competed on quality, but had some unique characteristics that represented the Napa Valley concept of place." Former Chronicle Travel Editor Jeanne Cooper writes the Aloha Friday column and Hawaii insider blog for SFGate.com. E-mail: style@sfchronicle.com