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Wedding Issue

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Ocean Vodka

Local Grown

BY MELISSA CHANG

We all know about buying local—not just to get the freshest products, but to be able to taste the environment in which they were created. We buy produce from the farm, eat local meats, drink Hawai`i brews.

When Ocean Vodka hit the market, people were intrigued with the fact that it's a locally distilled spirit made from deep-sea ocean mineral water from just beyond the Hawaiian Island chain. It's USDA-certified 100% organic and is the only vodka in the world distilled from organic sugar cane, so it's naturally gluten free. On top of that, it doesn't contain any genetically modified organisms (GMOs), herbicides or pesticides. Now, drinkers can marvel at it being the only vodka in the world that's powered by the ocean, sun and earth.

Ocean Vodka retails for about \$33, which is at the higher end of the spectrum for vodkas. But when you look at the ingredients and the man-hours that go into making a bottle (which, by the way, is made with about 60% recycled glass), you might consider it the price of doing local business.

The company was started in 2005 by the Smiths, a kama`aina family with roots in Maui's north shore, with the intention to have a Maui business that produced an agriculturally based, nonperishable consumer product.

"Why a high-end vodka? Simply, we like to indulge in the finer things in life, and the ingredients were at our fingertips," said Ocean Vodka president Shay Smith. "We played around with different ag products, but realized that we enjoyed working hard and unwinding

at the end of the day with a cocktail. So that gave us an idea to start a spirit."

They use a proprietary column distillation process to produce an ultra-clean spirit that, when blended with deep ocean water, takes on a unique, mineral-rich flavor. I performed a taste test about four years ago with my friend Nathan Kam, as Ocean Vodka was hitting the O`ahu market. We both noticed there was a very subtle finish, like a hint of the ocean, but so clean that we had to concentrate hard to detect it. Was it our imagination? Hard to say, but there was definitely no bite, unlike the other vodkas on the table.

Other vodka drinkers have told me they prefer Ocean Vodka because its ingredients and distillation process minimize the likelihood of hangovers. As we sipped, Kam mentioned there are minerals in the water they use from the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawai`i Authority (NELHA) that may provide health benefits. A spirit that's good and good for you? Well, I didn't find any scientific research that proves it, but we do know that Ocean Vodka is a good steward of the land and ocean.

They're taking the business to a new (and sustainable) level with their new 80-acre farm in Kula, which is slated to be fully operational in April. It's been a long time coming, but the end will be a process that is even more unique than the vodka they make.

"The challenge was finding the right piece of property that matched what we are doing," Smith explained. "We needed a large-scale commercial parcel, but farming over the years has left the land kind of dirty in many places.



Lemon Blossom Martini

1 ½ oz OCEAN Vodka
1 oz fresh lemonade
½ fresh lavender blossom

Place all ingredients in a shaker with ice and
bruise. Pour into a chilled martini glass.
Garnish with a lemon wheel.

Wedding Cocktails



Strawberry Lemon Drop

1 ½ oz OCEAN Vodka
1 oz fresh lemonade
2oz fresh strawberries

Pour ingredients into a cocktail shaker over ice and shake vigorously. Strain into a martini glass or tall glass filled with ice.

Liliko'i Cosmo

1 ½ oz OCEAN Vodka
1 oz cranberry
splash of passion fruit juice or sweetened puree

Combine all ingredients into a shaker with ice and bruise. Pour into a chilled martini glass Garnish with fresh flower or slice of lime.

Wedding Cocktails

“A lot of people have big ag estates, but we didn’t want a 15-acre piece of farm property next to someone’s personal estate. [This property] lent itself to expansion, plus gave us space between our neighbors,” he added. “This place had been used for cattle farming for the last 25 years, so it was automatically eligible to be certified organic. We couldn’t wait 3.5-plus years to get it certifiable.”

According to the National Organic Program (NOP), certified organic crops must come from land that is totally free of prohibited substances for 36 months prior to the first organic harvest. You are required to show documentation about when you last applied prohibited substances and you can’t use GMOs or treated seeds during the transition period.

When you get to the farm, you might think it’s another sugar cane field, since that’s what’s surrounding the distillery building. As it turns out, the Smiths found they could turn sugar cane into vodka, which is how the business got started. And, unlike harvesting cane for pure sugar, their farming is done by taking ripe cane and leaving the babies to mature for the next harvest. This helps in land and soil conservation by not using the practice of cane burning to clear strip the land. (It also means no “black snow,” much to the delight of Maui residents.)

They currently have 12 different varieties of sugar cane growing on property, and are looking to acquire another 15 to 20 more from the local botanical gardens.

“This big facility and the farm will allow us to work our own land and grow different things that we can build into different spirits products,” Smith said. “We’ll bring in organic corn and other ingredients, then might try making gin, play around with whiskey ... just unique things we can showcase in limited edition at the distillery that promotes and celebrates Hawai’i.”

Smith added that there’s more greenery planted in their “park” areas every day, and their next project—as you read this—is expanding the Martini Garden, an area designed for martini lovers and highlighting fresh, local ingredients such as Kula lavender, local citrus, passion fruit, pineapple and strawberries. Visitors will feel like they’re in a natural farm environment, with lots of color. Eventually, the open ground area will be available for special events for hundreds of guests.

“It’s an open-air environment that will feel like there’s nothing around but a view of the north and south Maui shores, and a backdrop of the west Maui mountains,” Smith said. The grounds and facility will also be available for tours.

Aside from the green growth, the operations will be run as “green” as possible, as well. The building will feature enough solar panels to run the whole facility, plus a backup generator—meaning they can be completely off the grid.

The new property, when finished, will bring all the components of manufacturing their vodka into one place, which means the farm, distiller, sales and marketing will all be together. They expect this consolidation to enable them to increase production tenfold.

Interestingly enough, it’s not just about running a business, but being able to give back to the causes they love. Since parents Kyle and Kiana Smith are surfers and their business starts from 3,000 feet under the sea off Big Island of Hawai’i, they support ocean-related causes like the Ocean Institute, the Ocean Foundation, Reef Check, One World and more. They’re also sponsors of the Maui-based Hawaiian Islands Land Trust.

“It’s in our DNA. It’s important since we are on islands in the middle of the ocean.

Our consciousness of the land that we have is not just because it makes a healthier alcohol. We have a real respect for the land,” Smith explains. “There are other spirits out there. But the difference is that we’re a local family creating a local product. We step out on a limb and actually use our blood, sweat and tears to get it done.

“We started as a project eight years ago and it’s been on the market 6.5 years. We do everything: drive the tractor, build the building ... everything. So in addition to manufacturing, now we have the farm element with the same people who were doing everything before,” Smith said. “Bootstrapping local style is challenging in Hawai’i. It’s a testament to how hard we all work to live in paradise.” ✨



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Ocean Water

2 oz. Ocean Vodka
4 oz. coconut water
Muddled mint leaves
Dash of agave syrup

Muddle mint leaves at the bottom of a shaker. Pour remaining ingredients into shaker over ice. Shake vigorously and pour in a short glass of ices. Garnish with a sprig of mint and a slice of lime.

Ocean Gimlet

2 oz. Ocean Vodka
3 tsp. fresh lime juice

Pour ingredients in a shaker over ice and shake vigorously. Garnish with a slice of lime and/or a sprig of mint.

Wedding Cocktails