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Family creates vodka with spirit of sustainability

By Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jun 09, 2013

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COURTESY KRISTIN HETTERMANN

Four goers get a look at the warehouse, where boxes of Ocean Vodka are stored before they're shipped.



When Shay Smith's family gets together, no matter whose house the party is at, the busiest spot is the bar. "Everyone bring ingredients and plays mixologist," Smith said. "We all try and outdo each other. In fact, that's how most of the recipes for Ocean Vodka's specialty cocktails came to be."

Smith, dad Kyle, mom Diana and brother Sye introduced Ocean Vodka in 2006 — the result of brainstorming ideas for a nonperishable, agricultural-based Maui product.

"One day as we were talking about options, I looked at the vodka cranberry in my hand and had one of those 'aha' moments," said Smith, the company's president and chief executive officer. "Alcohol has a long shelf life; why couldn't we make a high-end vodka? We thought it was a safe bet; even if our product didn't turn out to be good enough to take to market, our bars would be full for a long time."

At the time, the Smiths didn't know anything about vodka except that it was their drink of choice. They delved into research, befriended experts in the spirit-making industry and tested batch after batch until they came up with a winning recipe. Amazingly, they took Ocean Vodka from concept to reality in just 18 months.

Today the company is headquartered at a new 80-acre solar-powered organic farm and distillery in Kula on the slopes of Haleakala. Ocean Vodka's primary ingredients are sugar cane grown on site and water pumped from 3,000-foot depths off Hawaii island's Kona Coast.

"Ocean Vodka is the only spirit in the world that's made with deep-ocean water," Smith said. "The water is purified through a process that removes sodium while retaining minerals such as potassium, calcium and magnesium. Those minerals pick up the flavor profile in our vodka and enhance its flavor."

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The entire Smith family is involved with operations — from harvesting sugar cane and distilling alcohol to designing packaging and handling sales and marketing. "Everyone wears multiple hats; we like being hands-on with the business," Smith said. "You can even find us putting labels on bottles and boxing them."

Ocean Vodka began offering 45-minute tours in late April.

In addition to admiring views of Maui's central valley and north and south shores, participants get up-close looks at 20 sugar cane varieties — which vary in flavor, texture and sugar content — and sample at least three of them.

They also learn about Ocean Vodka's sustainable farming practices and green vodka-making processes. "We use the most Earth-friendly raw materials we can find, beginning with our water source," Smith said. "Ocean water is obviously more plentiful than fresh water. We harvest only ripe cane; we leave the babies alone, let them grow and pick them when they're mature. Not burning our fields helps preserve the amount and quality of the soil."

In addition, Ocean Vodka's bottles are made with 60 percent recycled glass, which melts faster and at a lower temperature than new glass, thus conserving energy during manufacturing. Organic inks and coatings are used to decorate the bottles.

Two 60-foot stainless steel columns that operate simultaneously are key to the innovative distillation system. Each of the 138 platelets in the columns is a miniature distillation unit.

"Liquid continuously flows through the platelets, which strip away impurities," Smith said. "This continuous column distillation refines the alcohol in one step as opposed to traditional distillation in a pot still, which refines it a few times in batches."

A stop is made at the Martini Garden, where 15 kinds of fruits and herbs are growing, including white pineapple, lemon, lilikoi (passion fruit), peppermint, rosemary and thyme. "You can make a cocktail with flavored vodka, or you can use a 'clean' vodka and fresh ingredients," Smith said. "For example, to make a strawberry basil martini, you take fresh strawberries and basil, muddle them in a glass and add vodka and ice. Shake, pour it into a martini glass and voilà! You have a fabulous martini!"

The Smiths trace their roots on Maui back three generations. They're pleased to acquaint visitors with their family-owned-and-operated business, which has seen phenomenal growth in seven years.

"For kamaaina it's the ultimate expression of aloha to invite people into your home and show them the things that are dear to you," Smith said. "That's what we're doing with our tour. We're proud about what we're accomplishing, and we're excited to spread the word about it. Our agritourism experience adds another dimension to the usual Hawaii vacation itinerary. We're sharing a taste of aloha every day."

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi is a Honolulu-based freelance writer whose travel features for the Star-Advertiser have won several Society of American Travel Writers awards.

OCEAN VODKA TOUR

Address: 4051 Omaopio Road, Kula, Maui

Offered: 9:30, 10:30 and 11:30 a.m. and 1 and 2:30 pm. daily

Cost: \$10 per person, \$25 including lunch. Children 11 and younger are free. Kids' lunch for ages 3-11 is \$12 (\$15 if they want the adult meal). All lunches come in a reusable souvenir bag.

Phone: 877-0009 on Maui or toll free 866-776-2326 from the other islands. Reservations are recommended.

Email: shonna@oceanvodka.com

Website: oceanvodka.com

Notes: Wear comfortable clothes, walking shoes and sunscreen. Most of the tour is on a fairly smooth dirt road, although irrigation does make the road muddy at times.

The Ocean Vodka Organic Farm and Distillery is available for special events, including weddings, birthday parties and corporate meetings. Call or email info@oceanvodka.com for details.



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MIXOLOGY MAGIC

Ocean Vodka is sold at retail stores throughout Hawaii; in 30 other states and the District of Columbia; and in Ontario, Alberta and Quebec. Here are three of the Smith family's favorite cocktails.

Ocean Paradise

- 2 ounces Ocean Vodka
- 3 ounces fresh pineapple juice
- Dash of hibiscus syrup

Pour ingredients into a cocktail shaker over ice and shake vigorously. Garnish with pineapple. Strain into a glass.

Ocean Citrus Guava Martini

- 2 ounces Ocean Vodka
- 2 ounces fresh lemonade
- 1 ounce guava juice

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

Ocean Green Flash

- 2 ounces Ocean Vodka
- 1 ounce fresh lemonade
- 1/2 ounce fresh lime juice
- 1/2 ounce fresh mango juice
- 1 teaspoon muddled lemongrass

1 teaspoon crushed ginger

Muddle lemongrass and ginger in a shaker. Pour remaining ingredients into shaker over ice. Shake vigorously and pour in a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a sprig of basil.

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SUBMIT COMMENT

sluggah wrote:

Congrats to Shay and family, they're good people.

on June 9,2013 | 05:55AM

REPLY

serious wrote:

We need more people to get that aha feeling and do something about it!!! good job!!

on June 9,2013 | 06:30AM

REPLY

kaupani wrote:

Stupid question, but if it's made from sugar cane, isn't it rum?

on June 9,2013 | 07:20AM

REPLY

967972005 wrote:

You're right, it is; and column stills are very common in the distilling industry, so that's not an innovation either. As for using the boutique deep ocean water, that's not really saving the planet either because it requires a lot of energy to draw and desalinate the water then haul it from Kona to Maui.

on June 9,2013 | 07:46AM

REPLY

primo1 wrote:

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