

The Seattle Times

Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Travel / Outdoors

Originally published Saturday, December 14, 2013 at 7:06 PM

High spirits on Maui: Take a distillery tour

New distillery makes vodka from ocean water and sugar cane.

By Brian J. Cantwell

Seattle Times travel writer



KULA, Maui — A new tourist attraction here is adding to what you might call, well, the high



spirits of visitors.

While the sugar-cane industry may be fleeing Hawaii for lands of lower labor costs, one new industry in Maui's upcountry is planting fresh fields of the towering, grassy stalks of tropical sweetness. The sugar cane is going into bottles of premium, Maui-made vodka.



Ocean Vodka, an 8-year old company that opened a new visitor-friendly distillery complex last April, is specializing in spirits made from organic sugar cane and desalinated, mineral-rich ocean water drawn from a depth of 3,000 feet off the island of Hawaii (the Big Island).

And while cane-growing may in general be on the wane here, the new endeavor owes its existence to Maui sugar growers of the past.

Old canes go organic

“There was no such thing as organic sugar cane on the island,” said Shay Smith, a lifelong Hawaiian and the 36-year-old president of this family-run, Maui-grown business.

But on the site of a plantation that went out of business about 20 years ago near Lahaina, sugar cane continued to grow wild. Since it had been untended and untreated with any chemicals or pesticides for that long, it qualified as organic.

“So we went and got about 100 plants and all these came from that,” said Smith, leading a tour through a groomed grove of 10-to-18-foot



sugar-cane stalks outside his new barnlike distillery building, 1,000 feet above the sea. Downhill are views across sweeping green plains to the distant shoreline and the jade-sculpted West Maui Mountains. Uphill, the 10,000-foot peak of Haleakala, Maui's dormant volcano, broods over

all.

Among other points of interest, tour-goers can see that not all sugar cane is alike. On his 80-acre spread, only six acres of which is yet cultivated, Smith grows 27 varieties. Some stalks are purple, some yellow, some green, some flamboyantly variegated. They have Hawaiian names such as Honua Ula — the exotic purple cane — and Hapai, the Hawaiian word for “pregnant,” aptly applied to a cane with curvaceous bulges up and down its stalk.

Kentucky ties

The natural, organic quality is a big selling point of Ocean Vodka, but even that requires some fancy machinery, such as the gleaming, six-story-high distilling tower shipped to Maui from Kentucky, where they still know more about making liquor than most places on the planet. The tower is so big that it sits outside the building, which houses storage vats and a bottling line.

Distillation takes place in columns containing more than 104 perforated plates, each of which is a refining distillation process said to make for exceptional purity and smoothness.

The entire complex is solar-powered, making it “probably the only *legal* off-the-grid distillery,” Smith

quips. The emphasis on natural purity even extends to using organic based inks in bottle labeling.

The brand has met with success, distributed in 34 states and expanding to new markets. It is the exclusive vodka served on Hawaiian Airlines.

Until recently, visitors on the \$10 distillery tour who hoped for a taste had to settle for chewing on a piece of sugar cane or maybe sampling the delectable vodka-and-goat cheese chocolate truffles made in a partnership with Surfing Goat Dairy, next door. (The goat cheese adds a fresh flavor without heavy creaminess, while the vodka adds a little zippity-do-da.)

But in November permits came through to offer tastings along with the tours. Visitors 21 and older get a souvenir shot glass from which to sip while looking out on a “martini garden” planted with lavender, rosemary and other herbs to flavor future libations for visitor enjoyment.

Also among future plans: stargazing events.

For Smith, his parents and other family members involved in the business, opening their workplace to visitors came naturally.

“One of the most respectful things people can do in Hawaii is to invite you into their home,” Smith said, taking in the long, broad view down to two shores of his island. “That’s what we wanted to do, invite people to see our home and share this.”

Brian J. Cantwell: bcantwell@seattletimes.com. Blogging at blogs.seattletimes.com/-northwesttraveler. On Twitter: @NWTravelers