

HAWAII aloha spirit at the bar

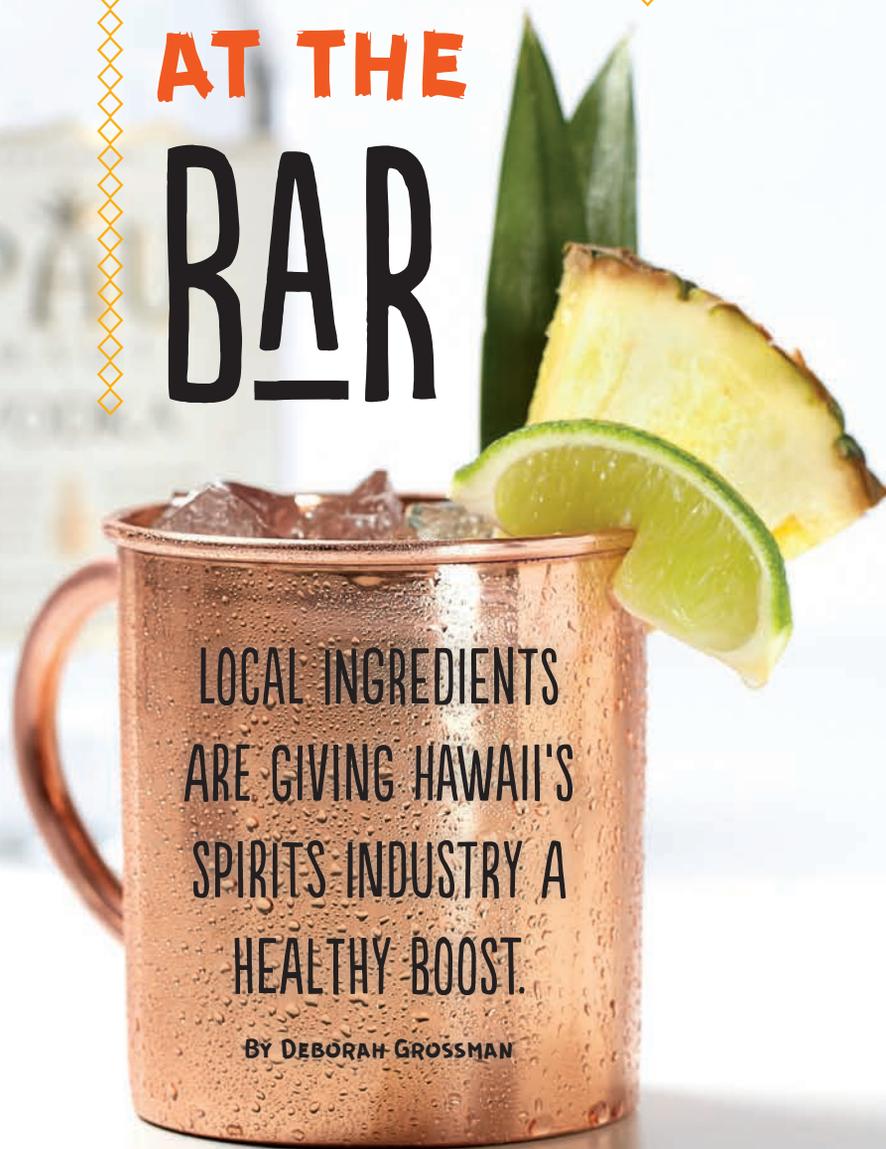
ALOHA SPIRIT

AT THE

BAR

LOCAL INGREDIENTS
ARE GIVING HAWAII'S
SPIRITS INDUSTRY A
HEALTHY BOOST.

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



Aloha means hello, goodbye and joyful sharing. An aloha welcome to Hawaii may encompass a flower lei or a mai tai, the signature island drink, and as visitors depart, they may carry leis—and a bottle of Hawaiian rum.

“The Caribbean is famous as a rum producer. But people don’t think of the Hawaiian Islands as an agricultural setting for rum, too,” says Bob Gunter, CEO of Kōloa Rum Company, Kauai. “Our rums are made here, with local ingredients and without slave labor, to the stringent regulations of the FDA and other government agencies. We focus on quality.”

Distilling spirits in Hawaii is a relatively young, under-the-radar business. “Craft Hawaiian rum hasn’t taken off here like on the mainland,” says Bobby Lozoff, the bartender who invented the Tequila Sunrise cocktail for The Rolling Stones’ Mick Jagger in Sausalito, California, then settled in Maui and ran a bar for decades. “The state liquor-control boards don’t make it easy to produce spirits.”

Yet despite the challenges and costs of doing business, the Hawaiian spirits scene has reawakened. Building on the locavore ethos, Hawaiians and visitors will see more homegrown spirits on the shelf and in their umbrella-decorated drinks. An island hop reveals several growing spirits companies. More restaurants in Hawaii and beyond are pouring aloha in their cocktails.

Be forewarned that not all spirits labeled “Hawaiian” are actually produced there. Dave Flintstone of Island Distillers, Honolulu, exemplifies the skepticism that some distillers hold about their colleagues. “Check the back label to verify the ‘Distilled and Bottled’ statement refers to Hawaii,” he says.

SUGARCANE TO RUM

When the Polynesians first sailed to the Hawaiian Islands, they carried “canoe plants” in their boats—sugarcane, sweet potatoes, ti root and pineapples. *Ko* is the Hawaiian word for sugarcane, and several companies such as Kōloa (tall cane) showcase the plant in their branding.

Captain James Cook made landfall on Kauai in 1778, and native Hawaiians supposedly first tasted rum that was stocked on Cook’s ships. By 1835, the first sugar plantations and mills were humming on Kauai. Hawaii became an agricultural force with sugar and pineapples, and by the mid-1850s, ‘okolehao, distilled ti root, was made on the islands. A few distillers have revived the ‘okolehao tradition.

Prohibition devastated the island distillers. In the ’70s, Seagram’s produced rum in Maui. But Hana Bay and Whaler’s rums, based on an old “Hawaiian recipe,” are made in California.

RUM FROM MAUI

Jim Sargent opened Haleakala Distillers, the first new distillery on the islands, in the ranching town of Makawao in upcountry Maui in 2003. Sold in Hawaii and seven mainland states, Haleakala is best known for Maui Dark rum. But Sargent also sells Braddah Kimo’s brand rum—the name means “Brother Jim” in Hawaiian. The distillery purchases molasses, the final byproduct of sugar production, from a local sugar mill. Maui Pineapple rum, made with fruit from a nearby plantation, is sold at 155 proof, the highest level in the U.S.

Sargent uses proprietary yeast for long fermentations. “Most commercial rums ferment in 36 hours, ours takes three or four days,” he says. “The big rum companies that pump out rum with fast, continuous processes are more like oil refineries than distilleries.”

The mission of Kolani Distillers, also located in Makawao, is not to make a super-premium rum at a high price, says owner Paul Case. “We make a mainstream product similar to Bacardi from Maui molasses—a good-quality product at a good price, \$18 a bottle.” Old Lahaina Dark, sold online and in Colorado, is often floated on mai tais from biker bars to The Ritz-Carlton, Case adds. “Restaurants in Hawaii tell us they’ve sold over 100,000 Old Lahaina mai tais.”

Hali’imaile Distilling Company takes a different approach to production in Makawao. Mark Nigbur sold his Colorado micro-distillery when he was recruited by LeVecke Corporation to join

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Pau Maui vodka is stocked at Roy’s 21 restaurant locations on the U.S. mainland. Mario Cernadas, chief operating officer of Roy’s, appreciates the all-Hawaiian ingredients in Pau Maui. “We like that Pau Maui is made in Hawaii, where Roy’s grandfather ran a Honolulu cafe. Roy’s takes guests on a journey around the Pacific Rim through fresh, flavorful dishes and specialty cocktails such as the Drunken Mule.” Cernadas pairs the Drunken Mule with the seasonal prix fixe menu, which may include crunchy filet mignon dumplings and seared salmon with long beans.

At The Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa, California, food and beverage director Frederic Najem stocks Ocean vodka. He often recommends a martini with a lemon twist to accentuate the vodka’s smooth, mineral taste. For pairing, Najem turns to scallops with their briny flavor to complement the vodka. “We enjoy promoting new quality products such as Ocean,” he says. “Though people don’t know Ocean, we let our guests taste it. After the tasting, eight guests out of 10 chose Ocean over national brands. People enjoy Ocean’s story and are enthusiastic about its Hawaiian origins.”

The first bar in the Bay Area to carry Koloa rum was Forbidden Island, a tiki lounge in Alameda. Owner Michael Thanos discovered a billboard for Koloa’s tasting room on a trip to Kauai. After sampling the quality, he ordered several Koloa rums. “I have a large global rum collection of over 100 bottles,” he says. “I’m not impressed with other Maui rums, but Koloa has a fresh, handmade quality. In particular, the coconut rum is one of the best in the world—you get a fresh, hand-pressed flavor from the coconut.”

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MAI TAIS AND MORE

The key ingredients of the Big Bamboo mai tai cocktail at Huggo's on the Big Island are Koloa Kaua'i silver rum and a float of Koloa Kaua'i dark rum. Eric von Platen Luder, president of Luana Hospitality Group, stocks Koloa rums at Huggo's and at hBAR at Lava Lava Beach Club locations on the Big Island and Kauai. Luder showcases Hawaiian produce and seafood on his menus, and highlights local spirits in cocktails such as the Big Bamboo and the Vege-Mary-Ann with Pau Maui vodka.

At the Kaua'i Marriott Resort, restaurant manager Georgine Deason points to popular cocktails such as the Pauhi Passion with Koloa Kaua'i dark rum, mai tais with Koloa Kaua'i dark rum, and the Pau Hana Mule Ride with Pau Maui vodka. She pairs these drinks with burgers made from grass-fed Makaweli beef from Kauai.

Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort's food and beverage director Scott Hamilton selected Old Lahaina rum and Ocean vodka. In the Maui Mai Tai, Old Lahaina gold and dark rums are used. The Blue Ocean with Ocean Organic vodka is the top-selling premium Blue Hawaiian drink. More than 25% of guests ordering Blue Hawaiians upgrade to the Blue Ocean. Hamilton pairs the drinks with coconut shrimp, poke, barbecue and ribs.

At Roy's Waikiki, restaurant manager Ikaika Sczymanski follows the philosophy of founder Roy Yamaguchi, the innovator of Hawaiian regional cuisine. "With the trend for local, we support island purveyors, but quality always comes first," says Sczymanski. Ocean vodka is poured in Dawn Patrol cocktails with lilikoi juice. The Homegrown is one of Roy's most popular drinks, with Koloa Kaua'i spice and dark rums, Elixir ginger mix, lime and pineapple juice. The bar also stocks Ko Hana rum agricole.

LEFT TO RIGHT: 1) & 2) Island Distillers Hawaiian Moonshine and Hawaiian Vodka; 3), 4), 5) & 6) Koloa Kauai Coffee Dark, Gold, White and Dark rums; 7) Maui Gold Rum

Hali'imaile. LeVecke is a large company based in Mira Loma, California, that processes high-proof, neutral spirits made elsewhere and bottles for their brands and under private labels for Costco and others. But in the Hali'imaile Distilling venture, LeVecke envisioned a craft spirits program.

Nigbur designed unique pharmaceutical-style glass column stills. His major innovation, though, was to use Maui Gold pineapples grown across the street as the distillate for his vodka and whiskey. Nearby Maui Wine crushes the pineapple into mash for Nigbur, who then ferments Pau Maui vodka with what he calls "superman" yeast.

Maui Moon flavored vodkas is another brand produced by Nigbur with pineapple distillate. With flavors such as hibiscus, pineapple/orange/guava and chocolate/macadamia nut, Maui Moon evokes the company's tagline, "Hawaii in a Bottle."

As a tribute to the early paniolo (Hawaiian cowboys), Paniolo Whiskey comprises the pineapple distillate and Kentucky bourbon whiskey. But Nigbur's most famous product is Sammy's Beach Bar rum, widely available across the U.S. The brand, made with Maui molasses, is owned by musician Sammy Hagar.

When Shay Smith launched Hawaii Sea Spirits Organic Farm and Distillery in 2006, his goal was to produce a viable organic spirit within 10 years. The Maui real estate developer bought an 80-acre cattle ranch and planted several acres of sugarcane—now certified organic—for his Ocean Organic vodka. Given that Hawaii has had zero recognition as a vodka producer, Ocean has surpassed expectations. Nielsen Company data shows that Ocean, available in 36 states, is the top-selling vodka in Hawaii and the fastest-growing ultra-premium vodka on the mainland, with sales behind only Grey Goose, Ciroc and Crystal Head.

To explain Ocean's popularity in the crowded vodka market, master distiller Bill Scott points to the packaging. "The bottle neck sits curiously at a 23.5-degree angle, just like the axis tilt of planet Earth. When you pick it up, it's like holding a mini planet Earth in your hands."

Production methods underscore the quality of Ocean, adds Scott. "We use custom 60-foot-high continuous column stills, which give me incredible control over product flavor and batch-to-batch consistency." He sources organic sugarcane from the family's farm and off the islands until the ranch is fully planted. Water is sourced from a pipeline 3,000 feet below sea level off the Kona Coast.

OAHU GAINING SPIRIT

After working in the Caribbean, Flintstone believed he could make spirits based on Hawaii's abundant natural resources. He launched Island Distillers, the only licensed distiller in Honolulu, to produce vodka, as well as the only moonshine made in Hawaii. Flintstone's products, Hawaiian Vodka, Hawaiian Coconut Vodka and Hawaiian Moonshine Okolehao, are distributed only in Hawaii.

The vodkas are distilled from turbinado sugar, partially evaporated sugarcane juice. The moonshine is distilled from this source and crushed ti root. Flintstone filters his products through crushed lava, which emulates how rainwater filters through lava to aquifers below.

Manulele Distillers near the North Shore, a 20-minute drive from Honolulu, farms 36 varieties of heirloom sugarcane destined for its Kō Hana rum brand on the 15-acre property. Kō Hana is rum agricole, or rum made from sugarcane juice rather than molasses or turbinado sugar. Kō Hana rums





are made in small batches highlighting single varieties of cane. There are three styles—barrel-aged Kea and Koho and unoaked Koa—plus single varietal bottlings.

Brand manager Kyle Reutner notes that the tours at the farm/distillery highlight the agricultural heritage of Oahu and introduce guests to rum agricole and the many sugarcane varieties in diverse colors from red to purple and green stripes. Kō Hana is available at 12 Honolulu restaurants, and the company expects to distribute more broadly next year.

KAUAI RUM

Gunter of Kōloa Rum worked in the sugar industry for many years before starting up several Maui distilleries. He built his custom distillery on Kauai with copper stills outfitted with columns for single-batch distillation of Hawaiian cane sugar, not molasses, and deep aquifer water. Gunter hosts a tasting room and country store at the Kōloa distillery.

Kōloa presents a wide range of rums, from white, gold and dark to spiced, coconut and the new Kōloa Kauai Coffee Dark. Neighboring Kauai Coffee Company roasts and grinds coffee to Gunter's specification for this rum. "Working with Kauai Coffee is a great collaboration of two local agricultural companies," he says. Kōloa, sold in 18 states and five countries, is the rum served on Hawaiian Airlines.

More Hawaiian spirits are distributed and stocked at mainland retailers such as Total Wine & More. Ed Fabian, store manager at the new Fremont, California, location, stocks several Kōloa rums, Pau Maui and Ocean vodkas. "I enjoy making mai tais, and sampled Kōloa rum in Kauai," says Fabian. "When I opened the first Total Wine store in Southern California in 2011, I added the brand to our premium rum line. The rums and vodkas are now more broadly available at our stores."

Restaurants in Hawaii and on the mainland will find more bar options arriving as innovative island distillers create new spirits. Hali'imaile Distillers plans to distribute its new Deep Island Hawaiian rum on the mainland. Flintstone is expanding Island Distillers beyond vodka to rum, whiskey and Hawaiian eau-de-vie, plus "pineapple surprises." Gunter at Kōloa Rum is producing new ready-to-drink cocktails such as Rum Punch and Pineapple Passion.

Meanwhile, Hawaiian spirits continue to set the stage for special meals, says Eric von Platen Luder of the Luana Hospitality Group in Hawaii. He pairs the ahi tuna poke tower with the Big Bamboo mai tai with Kōloa rums. And, he says, "Throw in a famous Kona sunset as the perfect ending for happy hour." ■

HAWAIIAN RUMS PASS THE TASTE TEST

Many Hawaiian rums have won awards that are touted online by the distilleries. In a small nonscientific tasting of Kōloa rums compared to international brands, the results pointed to quality products from Kōloa. The natural Hawaiian sources for sugarcane and water, craft distillery techniques and lack of additives made an impact compared to more-commercial products.

TASTE TEST #1: Kōloa Kauai Coconut rum was compared with a national coconut rum brand with ingredients from Barbados and the EU and bottled in England. The consensus of the tasting group was that the Kōloa Kauai Coconut flavors smelled and tasted like fresh coconut and not a chemical composition. Several participants spontaneously said the Kōloa Coconut reminded them of being at the beach while the international brand tasted industrial. Participants preferred Kōloa Kauai Coconut.

TASTE TEST #2: Kōloa Kauai Coffee Dark rum was tasted with an international brand made in Mexico labeled "rum and coffee liqueur." The label used to state "coffee liqueur," but was recently changed to add rum, the main ingredient, made from molasses. Kōloa rums are made from turbinado sugar (evaporated sugarcane juice) and retain a fresher flavor than the more-pungent rums made with molasses. All the participants reported that they wanted to drink more of the Kōloa Kauai Coffee Dark rum and less of the "thin soda syrup" style of the international brand.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 1) The Beautiful Kauai cocktail at Forbidden Island tiki lounge. 2) Hawaii Sea Spirits Organic Farm and Distillery. 3) Forbidden Island's rum shelf.

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