







# Clear Spirit

Handcrafted vodkas are sweeping the nation.

BY BRIAN BERUSCH

**WE FIND OURSELVES AT AN INTERESTING CROSSROADS** in the evolution of the world of spirits. Every decade for more than a century has had its quintessential cocktail—whether it was moonshine, Champagne, martini, brandy or another. Yet one thing throughout the passage of time that hasn't changed much are the players—the brands of liquor that serve as the “pow!” in your favorite mixed drink. Believe it or not, the same families have been distilling, labeling and shipping hooch to your local watering hole since before your grandpa saddled up to the stool.

However, that's all changing. In the new age of information at your fingertips and everyone-is-an-immediate-expert at just about everything, a host of next generation distillers are taking to the wheat and corn (and pineapple) fields, the hidden cocktail bars (where you need the bouncer's cell phone number in order to gain entrance) and vermouth washed glasses to bring you a new breed of liquor. And there is perhaps no better way to view this trend than looking closely at the world of U.S.-made handcrafted vodkas.



It may have taken almost 15 years, but Tito's Handmade Vodka—still considered a small batch vodka producer at 500,000 cases per year—is finally distributed in all 50 states. The Texas-based founder, a trained geophysicist and geologist who still tastes each and every batch before bottling, began distilling vodka from corn mash in order to “bring something to the party” as far as flavor profiles of vodka go.

“Tito has an exceptional palate,” Tito's brand manager shares. “We distill ours six times—not five—because he still tasted impurities. At seven there was no flavor left.”

A longtime favorite of bartenders in-the-know, Tito has recently posted videos on his company's website that tout the how-to's of infusing his clean vodka with fruits (either dried or just zest are best). This keeps his cache cool with mixologists—the “celebrity chefs” of the new age.

Brian Ellison launched Death's Door Spirits in 2005 on Washington Island, Wisc., naming the liquor company after a straight that separates the isle from the rest of the state. Originally a land planning and economic development manager, Ellison realized for the small and mid-sized farmers on the island to survive,



they needed a high-value product. Death's Door uses as much wheat from its rolling hills and fields to distill elegant vodka that evokes slightly nutty, toasted grain notes, among others.

Having almost doubled its production every year, Death's Door is bringing nearly 4,500 cases of vodka per year to select shelves—and will be one of the newest vodkas on the Hawai'i scene.

Closer to home, Mark Nigbur distills the 3-year-old Pau Maui Vodka on the slopes of Haleakala in pharmaceutical-grade all-glass stills—“the only ones I know of, anywhere,” he says. Unique to this vodka, Nigbur begins with Maui Gold pineapple juice, which is fermented and blended with pure Hawaiian spring water. Although there is no hint of pineapple in the finished product, there is a lingering sweetness to the ultra-clear spirit which Nigbur also attributes to his unique stills. Pau ups the game with unique packaging and hand-etched bottles that are limited and numbered.

At just 500 cases per month, it's a hot score if you can get it. (Nigbur also launched Island 808 vodka that is blended and flavored with the likes of coconut, lychee, pineapple and POG.)

On O'ahu, David Flinstone is the mastermind (and sole employee) of Hawaiian Vodka, which handcrafts 500 gallons at a time from sugarcane mash. After an unofficial apprenticeship in the Caribbean (where he taught scuba diving), Flinstone spent years refining his hand at distilling vodka, which he now calls “perfect.”

“You're aiming for the purest, cleanest, smoothest spirit possible. The removing and softening of nuances through a

## ASIAN GRAPE MARTINI

(as shared by Brian Ellison of Death's Door Spirits)

- 5 - 7 grapes
- 1 ½ oz. Death's Door Vodka
- ½ oz. agave nectar
- 1 ½ oz. sake

*In a cocktail-martini glass, muddle grapes with agave nectar and sake. Add Death's Door Vodka and ice. Sharply shake and strain into chilled cocktail/martini glass.*  
Garnish.

**GARNISH:** lemon twist; grape skewer

Vodka bottle images courtesy of brands

filtration process is where they differ. And where 99 percent of people use granular activated carbon to filter/absorb the impurities, I use crushed lava from the Big Island to emulate the natural process of rainwater that falls on lava and ends up in our aquifer,” Flinstone says.

After refining his ultra-clean vodka to his liking, Flinstone set out refining an extract from fresh, natural coconut, which he now blends into a Hawaiian Coconut Vodka.

In the arid plains of Idaho, American Harvest also uses wheat (not potatoes) from local farmers to craft a smooth product. Available thus far in about half of the U.S., they are using wind power and water from the nearby Snake River to craft a certified organic product that spokesperson Olivier Bugat calls “a great mouth feel, neutral, a long finish but no burn.”

“It was important that we had an American-made product, first,” says Bugat. “Organic came after. Our whole system had to be sustainable.”

Sustainability is a buzzword that pointed us directly to GreenBar Collective's Tru Organic Vodka, a California-based operation launched in 2004 that insists on organic produce for all its products. Founders Melkon Khosrovian and Litty Mathew began noticing that when they started with organic produce, the concentration of flavor and aroma was heightened. Their entire product line (which includes liqueurs and bitters) is now skewed toward relations with nearby farmers.

After all is said and done, what do handcrafted spirits have over the big guns we've all come to know for so long?

“You can try a small-batch vodka side by side and they will always be better than the Grey Gooses, the Kettle Ones and the Smirnoffs. Smaller means you can control the perfection. Larger producers spend their dollars on marketing, not on refining the product,” insists Flinstone. ♦

