

## Feature Farmer

**Paul Turner**

### **Waikulu Distillery: A Farm to Bottle Distillery With Rainbows Makawao, Maui, HI**



**Area under production currently and how long have you been farming?**

Today, We have been farming for ~13 years. Waikulu Distillery sits on 7.6 acres, with 6 acres under production.

**Number of years in production?**

The farming journey began in 2012, however, it wasn't until 2022 that the agave crops, planted 12 years earlier, came to fruition when the first crops started generating income for the farm.

**Crops grown, animals raised, other goods & services**

The farm specializes in growing blue agave and limes. While no animals are raised on the farm, the operation focuses on producing distilled agave spirits and providing agave plant stock to other growers.

**Number of employees and/or family members involved in the operation?**

My wife and myself. There are a total of seven people, including ourselves.

**What is your production system and fertility management?**

The farm operates without an irrigation system. To maintain soil fertility, all by-products from agave processing are composted and used for top dressing. Additionally, we amend the root zone with calcium, magnesium, other minors and a small amount of nitrogen, in the form of calcium nitrate.

**What are your pest management practices?**

We do very little pest management. Occasionally, ants will colonize mealybugs on



new plantings, but is easily controlled with ant baits.

**What is your process for complying with food safety regulations?**

Fortunately, as a distillery we are exempt from much of the difficult compliance and tracking. The rest is covered by the training required by the Hawaii DOH.

**What training or practices have you adopted?** Luckily we've had almost no employee turn-over, so little training of new hires - which is the hardest and most time consuming. Much of the safe food handling techniques required for edible crops don't apply to producing distilled spirits, so it's not hard to be in compliance. Our own sanitation requirements to produce a high-quality spirit is more challenging, and we constantly improve/evolve that through collective analysis.

**What are your strategies for controlling costs?**

The highest costs in the operation are employee salaries, followed by the expenses associated with containers, including bottles and labels, and liquor taxes. While these costs are significant, the farm takes pride in providing fair wages to employees. Although there is little that can be done to reduce taxes and container costs.

**Where do you sell your products?**

The farm's products are exclusively distributed on Maui, with the majority of sales coming directly from the on-site tasting room. In addition to direct sales, the farm's distilled spirits are also available at various shops, restaurants, and bars across the island.

**How do you promote and keep up with market trends?**

To stay informed about market trends, the distillery relies on insights from a large distillers' organization, which provides valuable industry-wide information. However, some of the most useful insights come directly from customers, many of whom are passionate enthusiasts with extensive knowledge of the tequila industry.

Marketing efforts primarily focus on digital platforms such as Instagram and Google Maps to reach potential customers. Additionally, the distillery collaborates with restaurants and bars through incentive programs that encourage them to feature Waikulu



on their cocktail menus. This approach provides an organic and cost-effective way to build brand awareness and expand the product's reach.

**What does the future hold for your farm?**

The farm has successfully met its long-term goals and does not anticipate any major changes in the future. While additional acreage would allow for more time to rotate fields, acquiring nearby land remains a challenge due to its limited availability and high cost.

**Are there any changes or expansions planned?** Not really. We could use a couple more acres so there's more time to turn fields over, but land nearby is hard to find and eye-wateringly expensive.

**What advice would you give to other aspiring farmers and ranchers?**

I don't really have a broad knowledge of farming and my experience is limited to this unique venture, but it would be the same for anyone starting a business - make sure your business plan still works when everything goes wrong. If you can stay afloat when the tractor breaks down, your best employee walks and the bureaucrats bring you to your knees, then you should be very profitable when things go right.

**Are there any specific practices or organizations you recommend?** I'm not glued to any one philosophy and try to learn from them all. Organic practice is good, but being 100% is going to make your life unnecessarily hard sometimes. For sure pesticide and fertilizer use is out of control, but that doesn't mean it has to stop completely. Education and understanding why things are done, even the bad methods, will help you make wise choices.



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