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Copalli Rum's Ed Tiege and Waluco Maheia Explain How to Create an Eco- and Community-Friendly Distillery

In 2005, financier Todd Robinson (the same guy who bankrolled the now-disgraced Belcampo Meat Company), was fishing off the coast of southern Belize — or, at least, he was trying to fish. Turns out, the fish weren't biting. That, locals told him, was because people had been logging the rainforest. The Rio Grande River,

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which forms Belize's largest watershed, was filling with nutrients and silt from soils upturned when trees were cut. Sent downstream to the ocean, the runoff was polluting the reef that supported sealife.

Robinson's solution was a financier's one: He took out his wallet and bought up 22,000 acres of rainforest along the river. He aimed to protect it. Yet, because the logging had provided a means of income for the local community, he had to go further — creating some viable businesses that could provide jobs to displaced loggers in the underdeveloped Toledo District.

The acreage had come with an old fishing lodge and a defunct mango grove. A plan was hatched for a tripartite business owned by a trust that supports philanthropic efforts in the Toledo District. It is named after a local species Robinson was helping to save: Copal Tree (<https://www.copaltreelodge.com/>). The lodge underwent a luxury overhaul, and the mango grove made way for a multi-use farm with a sprawling chef's garden, goats, chickens, vanilla groves, fruit orchards, shade-grown coffee, cacao to supply an organic chocolate works, and, most importantly, 75 acres of organic sugar cane — the raw material for an on-site rum (<https://vinepair.com/explore/category-type/rum/>). distillery that, today, employs the largest private workforce in southern Belize, paying workers three times the national average. On top of that, Copalli Rum funds a non-profit that supports community endeavors from the Garifuna Battle of the Drums (<https://battleofthedrums.bz/>) to assisted learning for secondary school equivalency diplomas and many other cultural, educational, and environmentalist causes.

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All that and a damned good Daiquiri (<https://vinepair.com/cocktail-recipe/daiquiri/>). A trip to Copal Tree Lodge, where howler monkeys boom from the trees they share with toucans, is an immersive experience in an integrative enterprise that uses eco-tourism and plenty of cocktails to help preserve a rainforest way of life. A young brand launched in 2015, Copalli Rum (<https://copallirum.com/>) started importing to the U.S. three years ago, so now, stateside pros and their clientele can get their hands on the bottles and do their part to help southern Belize by pouring and sipping.

VinePair spoke to two of Copalli's key players about the rum and its mission. Master distiller Ed Tiedge spent time in the Marines and on Wall Street before launching the New York distillery Still The One (<https://drizly.com/liquor-brands/still-the-one-distillery/b15>) in the wake of the 2008 recession. He started at Copalli in 2015. Waluco Maheia was born and raised in Punta Gorda, the son of a legendary environmental activist who helped mastermind Copal Tree as an eco-social enterprise. Maheia started out as a distillery worker and now is assistant manager of Copal Tree Lodge in addition to serving as Copalli's global brand ambassador.

1. Ed, what's different about Copalli's sugar cane, and how does that affect the taste of the rum?

TIEDGE: With the rainforest surrounding us, there's a lot of biodiversity, so there are beneficial organisms in the soil that help the cane grow. We provide them the right environment by farming organically, minimizing tilling, composting manure, and treating the land as a living thing that requires care. If you have an intelligent organic system and healthier soil versus conventional agriculture, the plants are going to be healthier, and that will reflect in the flavor of the juice and ultimately, the flavor of the rum.

Our cane is also different from what they use in commercial sugar production. We use heirloom varieties. We went to local villages and picked some of what people were growing for personal use. Those broke down to yellow and red cane. Yellow was similar to commercial cane. We planted the red cane. During our first harvest, we found clumps of black cane in our fields. We ran a test on the juice and said, "This is special." That variety existed in the villages. Stalks got mixed in with the red cane, and it was just serendipity. I told the farm manager to start planting it separately because the red and black cane will hybridize if you don't keep them away from each other. So it wasn't until our second year of production that we actually had it as a separate crop.

The red cane juice has some tropical fruit notes, some salinity, and an intense cane grassiness. The black juice is completely different. There's more stone fruit in it. I get dried apricots. The grassiness is subdued, and the flavor's richer than the red.

2. How are the different canes used in the rum?

TIEDGE: Our white rum is all red cane. That's the rum we started with. Before I got involved in 2015, the engineering firm that built the distillery came from Puerto Rico, and they built it to make a light, Puerto Rican-style rum. I said, "You guys need to buy a pot still."

They found a pot still in Cognac, and they thought they could first run the rum through the column still and then the pot still. But the column still had already stripped out the flavor. We re-piped it so we could collect the first distillation in the pot. Now, the column rum never goes to the pot still. They're kept separate until they're blended. The white rum is a blend of 75 percent column still and 25 percent pot still.

A white rum made with pot-distilled black cane only is coming out this year. We're hoping to send it to France in September. Whether it is released in the U.S. or not is going to be dependent upon how it does in France. But every bartender I've ever tasted it on wants it.

3. This distillery is in a sort of ecosystem including Copal Tree Lodge, Copal Tree Farm, and also the larger environment of southern Belize. How does the distillery work within this ecosystem?

TIEDGE: We're trying to make an economically viable operation that adds value to the community, that makes use of the land in a responsible manner, produces a valuable product, and makes some money for everybody. That has to do with utilizing the farm to its capacity, and we translate that into a world-class product. But it has to be about the community, too, or else we're just taking. That's not how we see ourselves. Ownership has set up a non-profit that the distillery donates to. Waluco's dad, who is on our board, is

involved in seeing how those funds can hold everyone responsible, whether it's women's education or medical care or another project we support.

MAHEIA: My father, Will Maheia, is a big, big activist. As long as I can remember, he has been super passionate about the environment. He started TIDE (<https://tidebelize.org/>), the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment. He helped create the largest marine reserve in southern Belize. He was on the campaign against destructive gill nets from the 1990s. He's been battling illegal logging up until today. And I think that's why he was drawn to a project like Copal Tree. He's a local, so he understands you can't just take away the logging. He had family members that were involved in unsustainable fishing or logging at some point, so he understands the importance of providing economic opportunity.

4. Waluco, you have a background in environmental policy and you're global ambassador for Copalli Rum. How do those two things come together for you?

MAHEIA: I attended college in the U.S., but I always wanted to come back home, and when I thought about what I did while I was in Belize, it always came down to nature: fishing, hiking, and just being in the woods with my friends. Anywhere that you are in Belize, you're doing something in nature. Loyola University, where I went to school, was starting a new program in environmental policy. I fell in love with that discipline. I realized that nature was a driving force behind the tourism in Belize. People come here to appreciate something that is all around us: the biodiversity.

All these concepts were fresh in my mind when I returned. And here, we had this distillery that wasn't a heritage distillery trying to change and be sustainable. It was built from the ground up expressly to be sustainable. I'm also passionate about my

community in Belize, and Copalli is big on community. Between the lodge, the farm, and the distillery, we're employing 140-plus locals, and the environment and sustainability are a part of that.

5. How did you set up the distillery to be sustainable?

TIEDGE: It's a full-circle process. Everything's recycled and reused. When we harvest the cane and it gets pressed for juice, there are leftover fibers, or bagasse. Those fibers get burned in the boiler for energy. The juice gets fermented, then gets distilled. The rum portion is extracted, and that leaves lots of liquid filled with potassium and nitrogen and a host of other valuable products that are beneficial to the farm. That's called vinasse. The farm comes with a tractor with a liquid manure tank, takes that liquid, and spreads it back on the cane field. The ash from the boiler is also used as fertilizer on the fields. Then, we don't have to buy fertilizer.

It rains a lot here, so there's really no pressure on the water table. But from a water quality perspective, there's nothing better than rainwater. So we collect it on the roof and use that for proofing our spirits. It's really trying to take as little from the land as we possibly can.

MAHEIA: We also do not burn our sugar cane plantation, which is otherwise a very popular method with sugar cane producers. The grassy top part of the sugar cane can be annoying to work with, and some organizations would say the heat increases the brix in the stalks, which is something they want. But we do not burn our fields because we realize the detriment that it could have on the soil quality and the environment. All that smog in the air is not good for surrounding communities. Here, we hand cut it, and the top of the grass gets composted.

6. As someone who grew up here, can you describe what this project means to the community?

MAHEIA: If Copal Tree weren't here, there are two routes that people would use to find another job of some sort: fishing and logging. Those activities can be sustainable or unsustainable. We were a sponsor of the recent law banning gill nets. This form of commercial fishing is very destructive. The majority of our people were moving to sustainable handline fishing, but you'd have more people still using gill nets if we were not protecting the rainforest and the watershed. The logging industry is something that we see is still a constant battle, but you'd have more unsustainable logging occurring without this protection.

You have the distillery, and you have the lodge, and a big part of it is tourism. In Punta Gorda, we're the permit capital of the world. Permit is a trophy fish. Copal Tree Lodge accounts for many anglers that visit this region of the world. You take away the gill nets, teach locals about sustainable fishing, and now, some of the best fly fishermen in the world are from Punta Gorda. It's become a big part of the local economy, along with the rum.

7. Ed, you were a Marine and then a trader working on Wall Street. Copalli is a big change from those careers. How does it feel?

TIEDGE: I had been trained to basically lob artillery shells at bad guys and trade bonds, and those were my two skills before I was a distiller. At first, it was just the adventure of doing something new in this area. To start up a distillery literally at the end of the road in Belize? There's an attraction to that. As time has gone on, as far as being one of the people that is the keeper of the mission, I view myself as one of the more fervent ones. One of the things the

Marine Corps drilled into me is you always try to do the right thing. And you don't make excuses as to why you can't do the right thing. You just do the right thing.

8. Waluco, how do you sell the Copalli story when you're out doing brand ambassador work?

MAHEIA: Copalli Rum is still a new rum. It's a new, organic, sustainable rum being made in the heart of the rainforest. It's not just marketing. It always boils down to the people of southern Belize making a good-tasting rum in an environmentally responsible way. The people from my community working on the farm, working at the distillery, working at the lodge — we want to be the protectors of that. There's pride and passion that goes into the product. It's also showcasing Belize. We feel great that we're doing that right here in our hometown. It's putting us on the map.

9. Can you tell me a bit more about the community members who work at the distillery?

TIEDGE: Belize is a small country. There are two other distilleries in Belize that do their own distilling, and they don't do anything like we do. So we had to find people that maybe didn't know they wanted to do this or never thought about it. But you give them the opportunity and the training. The milling was easy. There actually used to be a rice mill close by, and we found guys who were mechanics who worked there. We had to bring in the technicians who built the boilers to train our boiler guys. I taught classes on the thermodynamics of water pressure and steam entropy and all that kind of stuff, and then I did the same thing with fermentation and distilling.

Sometimes, you get lucky. Sometimes, you get someone like Karen Yong. She's 29 years old, she's incredibly bright and incredibly shy, and because she got a degree in biotechnology and came back to Belize, she may have stayed working at her dad's lumber mill for

the rest of her life. She says this is not the job her Chinese-Malaysian parents had envisioned for her. But lo and behold, she's our distillery manager.

So it's being open to people that maybe don't have the perfect résumé but who are interested in the topic and are willing to learn. And it's always working with the community. I am the only non-Belizean on staff. Someday I won't be here, and then there will be no non-Belizeans on staff. That's the ultimate objective.

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