

# Asia Eater

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## END OF THE LINE



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# A home rum

*A small distillery on Koh Samui is pioneering quality over quantity.  
Text by Liam Aran Barnes, photos by Martyn Goodacre*



In a peaceful tropical nook, nestled in the south of the Thai island Koh Samui, the only sound to rupture the silence is the dull buzz of sugar cane-laden flatbed trucks that occasionally amble down a single-track road. The vehicles eventually pass through an unassuming gate and into a palm-tree flanked estate to their final destination, the Magic Alambic Rum Distillery.

Founded in 2002 by French couple and former fruit farmers Elisa and Michael Gabriel, the small-scale factory is one of the only distilleries of its kind in the Kingdom and provides a range of artisanal rum to eager consumers country wide.

“We started the business as more of a hobby than anything,” Elisa, who is also half-Martiniquais,

says. “My husband and I had always been big fans of rum, but when we came here on holiday and tried some we found the quality to be very bad.”

Upon semi-retiring to Samui from their native France, the Gabriels purchased a seven rai (11,200 sqm) estate with ambitions of producing an alternative, high-quality alcoholic product to satisfy Thailand’s more refined rum aficionados.

“The original concept was to distill the alcohol using fruit, as we were unaware that Thailand has an abundance of sugar cane,” she explains. “After a few weeks of trying with various fruits, however, our Thai manager recommended we use sugar cane. It was great timing as the season had just begun... and we haven’t looked back since.”

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*Whether it's the lingering, yet subtle, aftertaste left by the coconut-infused variety, or the more potent pineapple option, the smooth, heady aroma demands the drinker's attention from the initial sip to the bottom of the glass.*

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The couple set about obtaining the obligatory paperwork and although the initial application for a licence to distill was quickly provided, they soon encountered a bureaucratic quagmire when applying for distribution rights.

“The local authorities knew very little about the rules surrounding alcohol [because] we were the first company on the island to go down this path,” Elisa says. “I think, when we first started, they didn’t trust us too much.”

More than 12 months passed, characterised by endless back-and-forths between the couple, the local and the national authorities, before Magic Alambic eventually received the go-ahead to sell its unique tippie.

Using only locally-sourced sugar cane - of which Thailand is the world’s fourth largest producer - sourced from the southern provinces, the team undertook an experimental period before honing their distilling skills and deciding on four flavours - lemon, orange, coconut, pineapple and original.

“Once the sugar cane arrives we crush it immediately to avoid losing the juice and after we add yeast to increase the speed of fermentation. If the yeast is not added, it will take a very long time to ferment and due to the weather here, bacteria will start to eat the alcohol,” Elisa explains. “It takes about

five days maximum to ferment and we then distill in the steel vat, helping to remove the blue, bad alcohol which gives you a headache! This is why we keep only the middle alcohol.

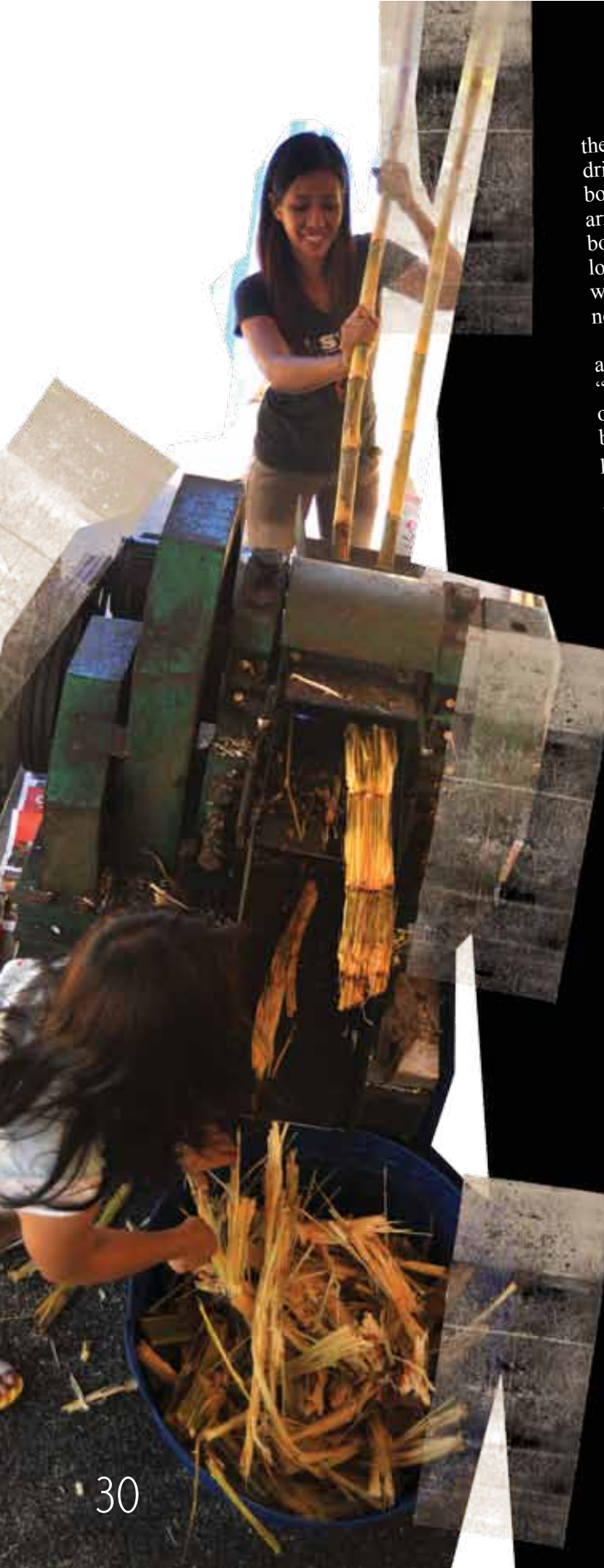
She adds that the process is not dissimilar to that used to make single malt whiskey, but varies considerably to the way major distilleries produce rum.

“This is not an industrial process and the other major difference is that while mass-produced rum, such as Bacardi, tends to be made with molasses instead of the sugar cane juice,” Elisa adds. “We follow the same methods as local Caribbean rums from Guadeloupe and Martinique - the birthplace of rum.”

Only using grade A alcohol does, however, reduce the final product to less than 10 percent of the original input and subsequently keeps the production cost high, but the company was, after all, founded on the core principal of “quality over quantity”.

At first taste it’s easy to appreciate why the fastidiously-flavoured rums have been such a hit, not only with visiting tourists and dedicated customers located throughout the region, but also an abundance of five-star resorts and high-end restaurants both on Samui and further afield. Whether it’s the lingering, yet subtle, aftertaste left by the coconut-infused variety, or the more potent pineapple option,





the smooth, heady aroma demands the drinker's attention from the initial sip to the bottom of the glass. While indulging in the array of flavours offered by the chromatic bottles at the distillery bar, it doesn't take long to notice the labels are all exclusively written in Thai, in addition to the fact there's no mention of the word 'rum'.

"When we started out, the law stated that all labelling had to be in Thai," Elisa explains. "We were not even allowed to write 'rum' on the bottle, it had to say 'white alcohol' because we're a small factory – they want to protect the big companies."

In order to extend the licence to permit the spirit being aged in the barrel and subsequently classified as rum, rather than white alcohol, Thai law stipulates that the distillery must own more than 300 rai (480,000 sqm) of land – another measure she believes is in place to maintain the stranglehold on the market enjoyed by the industry's major players.

Indeed, Thailand's alcohol industry has long been in the hands of the wealthy minority, dominated primarily by the Boon Rawd Brewery - famous for its flagship lager Singha, before the market share transferred to Thai Beverage, the brainchild of Thailand's second richest man Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi, in the mid-90s.

The monopoly has long stymied any significant progress in the Kingdom's alcohol industry, both in terms of variety and quality, and even the finance ministry's liberalisation of distillation concessions in 2000 has done little to shift the balance of power. Established companies face virtually no threat from potential market entrants due to the large investment required to set up.

This fact doesn't trouble Elisa, however, who reiterates her distillery's quality over quantity ethos, adding that she's more than happy with the level at which Magic Alambic currently operates.

"We had a delegation from Mekhong [Thailand's first commercially produced and most recognised rum] visit the distillery in 2009, and then about a year later, I met a Frenchman who worked for them. I told him the story and he said 'don't worry, they don't want to do the same as you... they would lose money'," she quips. "We are an artisanal brewery and didn't move here for big business. We wanted to do something with perfection, patience and heart."