

Vacation in a Can

Launching a business during a global pandemic takes more than guts and guile.

It takes meticulous prep, detailed planning, ample vision . . . and in the case of CoCo Vodka and Rum – a really cool can.

Debuted in the summer of '20, amid the heart of the COVID timeline, CoCo Vodka (enjoycoco.com) and subsequent sister product CoCo Rum have made an instant splash in the increasingly-competitive "Ready to Drink" cocktail market.

A mere three years since CoCo's founding by fellow Canadians Mark Convery and Av Grewal, and less than nine months since the products' official launch, the pair of all-natural beverages are availa-



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ble in 26 domestic states and across four Canadian provinces.

"It's been a rollercoaster ride, starting with how to make it, where to make it, and how do we create cans and cases," says Convery, a veteran of entrepreneurial endeavors and CoCo's CEO. "And that was all before figuring out how to get the product to market. The concept actually started when we were in California. We thought, 'How can we make a vacation in a can?' And we instantly thought of coconut water – nobody has ever produced a coconut water beverage with real vodka and real rum. It's been an incredible journey."

The ride from nut-to-can is an unprecedented one, as CoCo's products represent the first-ever hard coconut beverage brought to market. The founders knew that the time-tested market for non-alcohol coconut water has become a retailer staple.



"We know that if you go to any major grocery store, coconut water on its own is a very stable seller, and has been for quite some time," Convery says.

Made with fresh coconut water, CoCo Vodka (5% Alcohol by Volume) combines triple-distilled vodka with fresh sparkling water added to the mix. The sophomore offering, CoCo Rum (also 5% ABV), matches fresh coconut water with sparkling water and premium white rum.

"We import the coconut water from the Philippines," says Convery, adding that the products are produced and packed in upstate New York.

"Coconut water is actually pretty much the same around the world, but it does vary in taste depending on how old the coconuts are, so we use fresh, young coconut water."

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"Part of the process has been seeing which brands have come-and-gone, and that's not what we wanted to be," says Grewal, CoCo's President. "We wanted to do everything right. So, part of this process has been understanding why certain brands didn't succeed, nitpicking those tiny details of why certain products didn't make it."

Lessons learned included an inside-out understanding of the product. With their products beautifully-presented with engaging, tropical colors, the CoCo co-founders quickly grasped the concept that new buyers needed to be attracted to the packaging. As segue to brand building, return buyers needed to then gravitate to what was inside the can.

"It's been a strategy of getting the product in people's hands with an eye-catching look, and then a quality inside the can to keep them coming back for more," Grewal says. "So many of these products in our market taste a little bit similar – and we didn't want to be that; we wanted to ensure that all of our products taste a bit different, distinct, and are unique in scent and flavoring."

Can-by-can, the CoCo team isn't simply selling a cocktail. They're offering a lifestyle.

"It's about fun, being active, enjoying friends and family," Convery adds. "When you look at all of our marketing and our content, it has a bright and colorful feel. In a market that offers a lot of the same old, same old, we wanted to be different. We're proud to be different. What's the point in putting another sugary beverage on the market?"

CoCo's mantra of "Vacation in a Can" came, perhaps symmetrically, at a time when most of the world was boxed-in.

"It's a concept of the drinks being an escape for people," Convery says. "Across the pandemic year, the concept is even more fitting; with so many people indoors for so long, I think we're all looking for an escape, longing for that feeling of being somewhere tropical. Our marketing just kinda' fed into the timing of the pandemic."

From a pandemic launch to eyeing post-COVID, the CoCo team is sticking in fifth gear.

"We initially thought we'd start with a soft launch this past summer, but that soft launch concept didn't last too long," Grewal laughs. "We had so much interest from distributors and retailers, which of course, was fantastic for us. It made us put the pedal to the metal; we don't want to turn down any opportunities to grow."

Now coordinating contracts with celebrity/athlete brand ambassadors and readying to release all-natural CoCo Vodka Pineapple and CoCo Vodka Lime flavors in the spring of '21, CoCo is currently prepping for debut of an online sales feature. The web augment should see added growth with a territory spread, as California shelves (in concert with an enhanced West Coast presence) will soon see the brand's blue and white cans.

While COVID may have placed much of the world on pause, a taste of the tropics mixed with time-honored fortitude proves a seemingly virus-proof toasting of success.

"It's probably not recommended to start a business during a pandemic, but we did anyway," Convery concludes. "Really, what this comes back to is just sheer persistence and hard work." — By Judd Spicer, California Business Journal.

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