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Casablanca Wine A Blend of Virtuosity and Technology

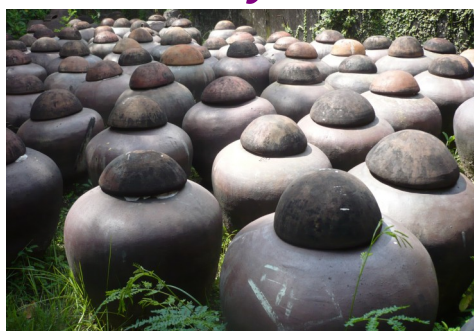


The Ilocos region has been revered for its reputation as a producer of *Basi*, a fermented alcoholic beverage made from sugarcane. In fact, someone wrote that *Basi* is considered the 'King of Native Wines' and that it is the pride of Ilocanos. Accounts have it that even before the Spanish colonizers came to the country, Filipinos were already drinkers of native wines, one of which is *Basi*.

La Union is one of Ilocos region's makers of the pale red wine. Apart from the municipality of Naguilian known as the *Basi* capital of the province, Bacnotan town prides *Casablanca* – its own version of the wine.

A retiree from the Department of Agriculture (DA) was bold enough to venture into *basi*-making and start a business utilizing sugar cane which was common in their place. Demetrio E. Fontanilla made valuable use of his supposed idle time after retirement. He turned a large area of his family's agricultural land into a sugar cane plantation to sustain his *basi* business. Colleagues from the DA encouraged him to formalize his business. And so in 2002, *Union Agridyne Products* was officially born.

The Winery



Earthen jars where Mang Demetrio stores the cooked sugar cane brew for fermentation.

As Mang Demetrio himself put it, the production of *Casablanca* is undeniably wanting in facilities and equipment. Serious commercialization demands a huge investment to cover technical requirements. Technical experts in the field of wine-making plus the necessary facilities and instruments in *basi* production are *must-have*, according to Mang Demetrio, who single-handedly runs his business.

Mang Demetrio's spacious yard accommodates all the needed equipment and processes in his *basi* production. Although a far cry from the sophisticated wineries of its counterparts, the *Casablanca*-maker suffices with what his version of a laboratory and oak barrels serve him. A separate structure stands as wine cellar and laboratory where jugs containing the cooked sugar cane juice are stored to ferment. These are backup to the earthen jars outside the facility. Just outside the cellar are big plastic containers for vinegar, the twin-product of the *basi*.

Lacking in many things his *basi* business may be, Mang Demetrio never ran out of resolve to keep on producing the purplish liquor. His dream of modern facilities for *basi* production has sustained him through years of siring *Casablanca*. In fact, his got wishes, he said, all safely stored in the piled jars in his yard, left to ferment with the beverage they contain.

DOST: 'Genie' in a Jar

It seems the heavens read Mang Demetrio's wishlist for the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) entered the picture just in time.

After its official registration as a business entity in 2002, *Casablanca* was awarded with a P200,000 grant, refundable in three years with zero interest, under the Small Enterprise Upgrading Program (SETUP) of the DOST. With the much-needed capital, Mr. Fontanilla was able to buy equipment for his wine production – pH meter (used to measure the acidity levels of the vinegar), a motorized milling machine and a bottle cap sealer which now stands in the middle of his 'lab'. DOST takes care of *Casablanca*'s package and label designs. Aside from these, Mang Demetrio and his business are adequately nourished with DOST's training programs. These interventions of the agency were delivered to *Casablanca*'s doorsteps through DOST La Union headed by Dr. Ismael Gurtiza.

The technical assistance provided by DOST La Union to Mang Demetrio introduced him to more possibilities and brighter ideas to enhance his entrepreneurial skills and at the same time improve the quality of *Casablanca*.

Generations of Fontanillas have perfected the art of basi-making, employing the time-honored secret ingredients and procedures of the past and now fusing it with the technology of the present. He still ages his wine in earthen jars called *burnay* in Iloko, flavoring it with the standards his family has managed to hone all these years.

Mr. Demetrio is now looking at the bigger picture. *Casablanca* as a business will grow with the right marketing strategy, enough capital and additional technological help from the DOST. He dreams of selling his merchandise in the mainstream business, targeting a larger market. For now, his *basi* is bought and known only to loyal patrons who have come to be familiar with the produce by word of mouth passed on by one satisfied customer to another. Oftentimes, people who come to his shop order by bulk while some would buy a bottle for the price of P120 each. Home-made wines and liquors are hard to find and this entices buyers to seek out the famed *Casablanca*.

Annually, his winery produces about 150,000 liters of the sweet brew. Like any virtuoso, Mang Demetrio wants to hit it big. He has gone this far and the itch just won't go away. He dreams of competing with the best – La Tondeña, Asia Brewery and San Miguel – the Big Three of the liquors and spirits industry. But to be able to do this, he must improve and enhance his technical side. He needs a bigger lab, oak barrels for aging his wine, technical people who knows the works and definitely some added capital. For now, if he plays his cards right, he might just hit the jackpot and realize his dream... with DOST on his side, of course.

Somehow Mang Demetrio desires this not just for his family but for the community. In fact, he has been able to contribute something for generating jobs in his place. His sugarcane plantation has offered income opportunities to his neighbors and he hopes to help some more. With the backing of DOST, his dream is taking shape.

Jobs were created because of the family's love affair with the *basi*. Imagine what result it would bring if he gets a bigger lab and oak barrels. With DOST as *Casablanca's* 'genie in a bottle,' Mang Demetrio's aspirations is only a blink away. Such an intoxicating thought to consider but surely it would catapult the industry to greater heights and make *Casablanca* a household name that the people of La Union would undoubtedly be proud of.

Now that's something to cheer about. *Casablanca* is not just a commercial wine like any bottled alcoholic beverage in the market today. It is a masterwork borne of the bond of a connoisseur's skills and the unfailing assistance of a patron that is DOST.



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