

Craft Distilling in Chicago

Words by Sophie Dyer

KOVAL Distillery is a craft distillery based in Chicago, USA, that produces organic whiskey, liqueurs and specialty spirits in Chicago's first distillery since the mid-1800s, and founded by Drs Robert and Sonat Birnecker. Their unique distillery process sets them out amongst the rest and Dr Sonat Birnecker gave us an exclusive insight into their ever-growing empire.

What inspired you to go into the industry of spirit-making?

Our decision to distil came about after deciding that we wanted a lifestyle change. Instead of making a down payment on a house, we took the money and invested in a still, moved in with my parents, and started the distillery. Robert grew up distilling at his grandparents' distillery and winery in Austria, and while American craft distilling was still in its infancy (there were about 90 when we started in 2008, compared to over 600 now), we became inspired by the prospect of bringing the family legacy of artisan spirit production to Chicago.

Can you tell us about KOVAL as a brand? Talk us through your products.

"Koval" translates to "blacksmith" in a number of Eastern European languages, but it also means "black sheep," or someone who forges ahead, in Yiddish. My great-grandfather earned the nickname Koval when he left Vienna for Chicago as a teenager to start a business—ironically not far from where our distillery is located. Robert's great-grandfather's last name was "Schmid," German for "Smith," so we chose KOVAL as a way of honouring both sides of the family.

Our distilling approach was also to become the backbone of our identity. In coming from a brandy tradition, where strict "cuts" are made to focus on the "heart" of the distillate, and in turn, the essence of the fruit; we wanted to extend the same courtesy to the grain by making tight heart cuts, which is very different from conventional American whiskey distilling. We wanted the cut that goes into our barrels to be perfect in itself, the barrel merely adding the natural flavour and character of the wood and char.

While we honour our family roots by making seasonal brandies out of sunchokes, pears, and apples, we chose to focus on whiskey, even white whiskey (which we see as a kind of grain brandy). Our main line includes a Rye (100% rye), Millet (100% millet), Bourbon (millet and corn mash bill), and a Four Grain (oat, malted barley, rye, and wheat

mash bill). We also produce a number of liqueurs, limited edition whiskeys, a rye-based vodka, and a dry gin, which we recently released to rave reviews.

Your branding, label and bottle design are incredibly modern and design-focused.

The packaging reflects the products themselves: clean, memorable, and contemporary.

What makes the KOVAL distillery different from other distilleries?

Every step of our production process is intentional, from the co-op of organic Midwest farms we source our grains from, to ensuring that only the purest cut (the heart cut) of the distillate goes into our barrels, to how the bottle looks on the shelf. Our use of alternative grains, such as millet and oat ensure that our flavour profiles are unique, and while we offer a new take on whiskey, it comes from three generations of experience in the industry. We are also leaders in the field, having educated over 2,500 people in the art of distilling at our workshops, in addition to having a hand in setting up over 90 distilleries in the US and Canada for other distillers over the past six years.

How are your products being received?

In the last seven years, we've been able to gain a very solid consumer base in Chicago and around the Midwest. We're extremely proud that we've also been able to grow our audience across the United States and internationally. Our spirits have won awards on both sides of the Atlantic and we are amazed at the reception our gin has been receiving both for its packaging as well as the spirit. Japan just joined the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and a number of other countries in our international distribution.

Could you explain the importance of barrel size for those who may not know the importance and significance of it?

We use 30 gallon barrels, compared to the more standard 53 gallon barrel. Because of the smaller density, the ageing process is intensified, and we're able to get a similar barrel flavour in less time than you would in a larger barrel.

What's next for KOVAL?

Expansion! We will continue to nurture new markets, while working on a few collaborations with some international beer companies.