

Against the Grain!

Robert and Sonat Birnecker recently launched Chicago's only boutique distillery—and sometimes one is enough **By Donna Shryer | Photography by Jim White**

As Chicagoans adorn decks and porches with chrysanthemum-filled terra cotta pots, Sonat and Robert Birnecker approach the traditional fall flower from a very different perspective. They distill it, with true artistic passion, to create chrysanthemum honey liqueur. The sweet yet vibrant liqueur marks the married couple's 12th organic spirited beverage since January 2009, when they opened Koval and made it official: Chicago had its first and only boutique distillery.

With no local rivals, the Birneckers challenge themselves, which includes entering national contests to see how they measure up. Last summer, at the All Things Organic trade show in Chicago, Koval's Ginger Liqueur took first place in People's Choice Spirits. They barely beat out the second place Rose Hip Liqueur, but that's okay—it's also a Koval product. Sitting in her Ravenswood distillery, Sonat smiles and says, "We compete against ourselves on a daily basis."

Robert, rebottling a shipment that wasn't perfectly packaged, nods in agreement. So, are the Birneckers obsessed with perfection? "Not at all," says Robert. "But our customers are, so that's what we deliver."

And deliver they do, having come a long way from the sole rye vodka that kicked off the Koval saga. Today, the inventory includes grain spirits, eaux de vie and liqueurs—all organic and kosher, locally sourced whenever possible and handmade at every point, which Sonat admits is a questionable business decision. "I'd say that 90 percent of distillers purchase neutral grain spirits from large companies and then flavor it," she says. "Absolutely, we'd make a lot more money if we started with neutral spirits. But for us, that's not acceptable. It's not what a true artisan does."

The Birneckers are counting on Chicagoans' thirst for excellence to prove their business model right. And this may be the perfect time, Sonat says, to reintroduce old-world quality: "I think what got us into this economic mess is everyone doing things cheap and fast, without thinking about quality and tradition."

Ah... tradition. It's something Robert has on his side. He's a third-generation distiller, born in Austria's

Salzkammergut region, where he often helped out in his grandfather, Robert Schmid's, highly respected distillery, Schmid's Distillery. After hearing about the Birneckers' decision to continue the family biz, Schmid stepped up, sharing centuries of knowledge.

In particular, Schmid taught the Birneckers how to craft pure grain spirits—a very European concept. "It started with our vodka, from pure rye grain," Sonat says. "To be designated vodka, you have to distill up to a certain percentage, which removes almost all flavor and aroma. What a shame! Rye is a very tasty, peppery grain. So we decided to distill Rye Chicago, our pure rye grain spirit. Then we added a pure grain spirit from only red wheat, only oat, only millet and only spelt."

With a solid start and considerable success, where does Koval go next? "Brandies," Sonat says. "Wouldn't that be great on a cold Chicago winter night?" ■

NOT YOUR GARDEN VARIETY Koval's handmade liqueurs are produced with organic, kosher and largely locally sourced ingredients.

