IN FINE SPIRITS

Chicago's First Artisan Distillery Is OU Kosher *and* Organic

Koval is a Yiddish word for 'blacksmith' or 'to forge," but the term has also been used to refer to someone who does something out of the ordinary, or a "black sheep in the family." It is thus fitting that Sonat Birnecker Hart and Robert Birnecker chose to name their company Koval, since it is not every day that one hears of a Professor of Jewish Studies and a Foreign Deputy Press Secretary leaving their careers to make spirits. Indeed they named the company after Sonat's great-grandfather, a renegade in his own right, who left Vienna at the turn of the century for Chicago at the age of 17, in search of a new way of life, much to the dismay of his parents and gratitude of later generations, earning him the soubriquet, Koval.

Sonat and Robert thought about making spirits for a while before relocating from Washington, D.C. to found Chicago's first boutique distillery. Robert's grandfather, whose name Schmid coincidentally also means "blacksmith," has made spirits in Europe for over 40 years. Robert felt that Americans are becoming more interested in low volume hand crafted spirits, similar to the regional spirits of Europe. Koval gains its inspiration from these European distilleries and thus plans to offer a variety of seasonal as well as annual products that make use of local flavors and produce.

In fact, Koval is now one of a growing number of artisan distilleries offering consumers an array of spirits made in small batches for more regional markets. These products are a welcome alternative to big name brands from abroad with little regional flair. Indeed, during this period of economic turmoil, many are turning away from such brands in order to support their local economy and revive what was once a flourishing American spirits industry largely lost due to prohibition. It is only recently that the American distillers have been able to follow the lead of the craft brewers in making a variety of creative new products that manage to capture national attention.

Koval is already making a name for itself as a unique spirits house, not least because it avoids the common practice of outsourcing the production of neutral grain spirits that are then only flavored in house. Koval makes everything from scratch, which includes the mashing of the grain and fruit to peeling sixty pounds of ginger by hand for each batch of organic ginger liqueur. They even label each bottle by hand including the number of each batch.

Koval is also trying to start a small revolution in the spirits world. Although they are producing organic rye vodka, they discovered that distilled grains have a smooth flavor and heady aroma that is completely stripped away when made into vodka. According to American law, vodka must be odorless and tasteless. Koval's founders felt that it was a shame to remove the natural flavors of organic wheat and rye and so they created "Rye Chicago" and "Midwest Wheat," both spirits that let the taste and aroma compounds of the grains shine through. In addition, Koval is producing a Ginger liqueur and is the only distillery in the United States to offer a Rose Hip liqueur. As soon as springtime arrives, Koval will be adding a variety of liqueurs and fruit brandies to its portfolio.

One of the reasons why Koval's founders left their traditional careers is because they wanted to get back to basics, to manufacture something of high quality, to participate in the kind of practices that made this country strong. They believe that by maintaining both organic and kosher certifications they are ensuring that their products are held to the highest standards. They use organic raw ingredients not only because they consider them more flavorful than conventional produce but also because it is a way to support sustainable agriculture. Koval sees its OU kosher certification as a key element of the company's identity as well, one that not only serves as a measure of quality but also as a means of maintaining a sense of community with other Jews. Koval wants to be able to supply superior taste to all L'Chaims.

Koval is located in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood and offers a variety of events and tastings throughout the year. To see what is happening now, check out the website: www.koval-distillery.com.

Rabbi Jacob Mendelson serves as Orthodox Union rabbinic coordinator for Koval.