



American Craft Spirits

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THE MAKERS

An Interview with Robert and Sonat Birnecker, owners of Koval Distillery in Chicago, IL

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American Craft Spirits: You work with several grains at Koval to produce your whiskey line. What are the more challenging grains to get right? What has surprised you along the way?

Robert and Sonat: Each grain comes with its own pleasures and difficulties. Rye is perhaps the most complicated to work with, but when done right, yields the most wonderful, almost floral aroma and peppery flavor. Millet is like vanilla frosting to work with, really creamy and a breeze to mash and distill.

American Craft Spirits: What is it like to work together as a couple?

Robert and Sonat: Perfect. We have very different talents and strengths that compliment each other, not to mention the fact that we get along very well (a good thing if you are going to spend 24/7 with someone all the time). We work well as a team and having a chance to work together gave us a lot of confidence. Engaging in a more old fashioned family business model has added a lot of richness to our lives and our son loves being with his mom and dad all the time!

American Craft Spirits: Chicago is a town that's not shy about drinking! What has been your reception from people in the city?

Robert and Sonat: On the whole it has been wonderful. Many restaurants and bars are embracing local spirits and it is really a pleasure to see businesses act like a community and work together. That being said, we are part of a very small group of artisan small batch distillers in the US for whom it is always a fight to get noticed over big multi-national companies with their advertising capabilities.

American Craft Spirits: Do you think you will always be as experimental as you are now, or do you want to reduce your line of offerings to a core few products once you know what people like?

Robert and Sonat: We will always try to push the envelope because it is a lot of fun. As experimental as we seem to be with lesser-known types of products, they are representative of many European traditional distillates; most of which got wiped out in this country due to Prohibition. Robert's grandfather has been making a rye white whiskey his whole life and no one would think to call it experimental in Upper Austria.

Of course there will be products that people will want to focus on but we will always follow the traditions of Robert's grandparents' distillery in Austria and make an array of interesting spirits. A lot of the narrowing of products will be due to distribution channels, many of which do not want to take on more than a few products for a number of practical reasons. Our hometown market will always have a chance to buy our entire line.

American Craft Spirits: Are there plans for aging any of the white whiskey? And if so, what kind of barrels will you employ? How long will you age each product?

Robert and Sonat: Ahhh...a question often asked. Of course! We will be releasing the first few products of our aged line, called Lion's Pride (after our son, Lion), this fall. The line is also an unconventional college fund for our son. We will start off releasing a Rye and an Oat and then introduce all of the other grains in due time. We are using American Oak barrels from Minnesota. They will not be aged more than a year, though they are in small barrels which has a lot to do with how 'quickly' they 'age.'

American Craft Spirits: Finally, what's coming out next? What are you really excited about now?

Robert and Sonat: Well, we are very excited about our whiskey. We will be at the Whiskeyfest in New York and it will be really interesting to afford people an opportunity to try a white whiskey next to its aged version.

