



Koval Distillery proprietors Sonat and Robert Birnecker.

A family that distills together

The Koval Craft Distillery in Chicago USA

It is unusual to hear about people picking up and moving to another city without the security of a job awaiting them; particularly when it means leaving posts as a tenured professor and an Austrian Embassy deputy press secretary. Sonat and Robert Birnecker did just that about eighteen months ago, when they left Washington, D.C. to found Koval, Chicago's first artisan distillery.

by **Avignon Lev**

Koval was one of the first small batch distilleries within the city limits of a major city in the United States. As Sonat puts it: "We were about to start a family and we kept asking ourselves, do we want to follow a logical career path based on our university degrees or do we want to follow our hearts?" Knowing that they wanted to start a family business where they could work together with their son close by, distilling was an obvious

choice. Robert had learned the craft from his grandfather who makes award winning distilled spirits and fruit beers, known as *Most* in Austria for close on fifty years. Growing up, Robert was immersed in a culture of small batch distilling that is much more developed than in the US. According to Robert, in Austria, "distilling is a source of pride for most farmers, like my grandparents. They make everything from scratch using their own grains and fruit."

Following his grandparents' example, Robert and Sonat decided that they would avoid the common industry practice of outsourcing their base alcohol, choosing to do everything themselves from the mashing of the grains to the bottling. They even went a step further committing to making only organic and kosher spirits so as to support sustainable agriculture and adhere to the strictest standards.

Family business

Koval Distillery is a real family business. Not only do they make their spirits from scratch, they do just about everything else as well with the help of family near and far. Robert's grandfather has made a number of trips to Chicago to see how his distilling legacy is being carried out and it is common to see Sonat's father bottling and packaging. Sonat's mother, an international artist, designed their

Art Nouveau labels. The distillery is even part nursery with their son having a play area cordoned off at the front of the plant, complete with a slide, drawing table, books and toys.

The name Koval is both an homage to Robert's grandfather whose surname was Schmid (smith in German) and Sonat's great grandfather Manik, who earned the nickname Koval (Yiddish for smith) after he left Vienna for Chicago. Koval also refers to someone who does something out of the ordinary or a 'black sheep in the family'.

Despite being such a young company Koval Distillery is already making its mark for creating unique spirits and is at the forefront of American distilleries leading the new white whisky trend. Robert explains, "We feel that rye tastes great without the oak aging and it is much more interesting than vodka, one can enjoy it mixed or straight." While it began with their Rye Chicago, the Birneckers quickly decided to make four other unaged whiskies including their Midwest Wheat, Levant Spelt, American Oat, and Raksi Millet. Currently Koval Distillery stands alone for making such an array of unaged whiskies, not to mention that they use 100% of each grain as opposed to a blend. According to the Birneckers, they felt that adding malt takes away from the natural pure flavour of the grain being distilled, so instead of malt, they used alpha and gluco-amylase alone to sacchrify the starch, which

they feel adds to the unique subtle flavours of these spirits. This however, does not mean that they are opposed to aging. They will be releasing a line of aged whiskies this year under the label, Lion's Pride Whiskey, named after their son Lion. These whiskies will all be made with 100% of each grain and aged in American oak.

Koval Distillery models itself after the small batch distilleries Robert grew up around near Salzburg, and thus, they produce an array of spirits that go well beyond those made from grain. In Austria, boutique distilleries often make a number of spirits as opposed to the Stateside model that seems to be more limited to a few spirits, typically a vodka and gin. Koval Distillery is not trying to produce huge volumes of any of their spirits, though they are being distributed in a number of states including Wisconsin, Indiana, and California. The Birneckers like being able to make an array of spirits and in particular, limited editions, as is the case with their Organic Pear Brandy and Bierbrand.

Collaboration

Bierbrand is a spirit popular in parts of Germany, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland, but quite uncommon elsewhere. Koval's

Bierbrand is the result of a collaboration with Koval's neighbouring brewery, Metropolitan Brewing. Brewery owners Doug and Tracy Hurst

mentioned that one of their batches of lager lacked the carbonation

they wanted and so they planned to dump it. Koval, hating to see such amazing beer go down the drain, bought it to make a beer brandy. While many distillers contract brewers to make wort for them to ferment and then distill, the process of making Koval Bierbrand involved distilling the actual beer and since it lacked its usual carbonation, there was no need to use anti-foam and the beer was simply loaded into the still and distilled. The result for those unable to get a taste is full-bodied and complex, with layers of flavours and a gorgeous aroma that echo the malt and hops of the spirit's beer origin.

Luscious liqueurs

The Birneckers have also added to their repertoire a number of luscious liqueurs with novel flavours including rose hip and chrysanthemum honey. Their Ginger Liqueur, which takes about 60 pounds of ginger per batch (about 10 gallons), is a favorite among mixologists who value its real ginger bite and smooth finish that works well in cocktails. Again bucking the trend of using neutral spirit as a base for their liqueurs, Koval instead uses its unaged whiskies as the base. Their floral and herbal liqueurs are also made using a



Above: The Koval Kothe still arrangement complete with super aromator and super dephlegmator.



Left: The Koval distillery product range.

combination of distillation and maceration, the details of which are a closely guarded family secret.

While the Birnecker's owe a lot to family distilling techniques, they also credit their Kothe pot still for helping them make distillates described in the *New York Times* as 'meticulously made' and 'second to none.' Kothe Distilling Technologies creates each of its stills by hand. In Germany, it is said that Ulrich Kothe's stills are veritable *Kunstwerke* or 'works of art', for their symmetry and aesthetic beauty, all of which are an outward expression of their energy saving construction and patented technology. Kothe stills are made of smooth un-stretched copper creating a uniform thickness of the copper surface unencumbered by hammered copper, a technique used to reestablish a level of thickness after stretching.

Inside, attention to detail is also obvious due to Kothe's unique welded construction without appendages allowing uniform transfer of heat into the mash, leading to an improved separation of heads, hearts and tails. In fact, the entire still is built without any soft or hard solder joints to avoid corrosion and the need for repair.

Koval's spirits are also made using a super

aromator, a special distillation column, with patented bubblecaps with increased copper surface and extra turbulent liquid motion. The result is intensive contact between fluid and vapour due, in part, to variable filling levels on the bubble cap trays. This makes for smooth and aromatic distillates and a reduction of higher boiling point compounds.

The super aromator also includes another mechanical system to increase the alcohol content of the distillates called the dephlegmator, a special cooling system where the alcoholic vapor comes in contact with this cooling system and higher boiling compounds such as water are condensed and separated. This process is made particularly effective since the Birnecker's potstill has a special double dephlegmator with a preliminary cooling system of the alcoholic vapor before it is transferred to the last bubblecap.

Indeed, Koval Distillery makes use of both technology and old world technique to create their spirits and they do so as a family. They expect not only to launch their Lion's Pride Whiskey line this coming year but also to introduce another brandy and some seasonal liqueurs. Few distilleries are willing or able to make such a broad range of spirits and the Birneckers do it with aplomb. ■