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[Food Chain](#) / [Food & Drink](#) Take a Sip: Koval Aged Rye and Oat Whiskeys

Posted by [Mike Sula](#) on Tue, Oct 26, 2010 at 1:01 PM



- [Mike Sula](#)
- Whiskey barrels at Koval

When [I first wrote](#) about Koval Distillery, I asked Robert Birnecker and Sonat Birnecker Hart if they'd ever consider aging any of their pure organic white whiskeys. A year and a half ago the couple had yet to release their first bottles, and the idea of putting up precious spirit in barrels for months and months when bills needed to be paid seemed like a dream. Even now that they've hired a second distiller, a publicist, and have added many more bottles to [their profile](#), it still seems incredible. And yet next week they'll be releasing four brown liquors that have been slowly aging in new charred oak barrels in the Ravenswood distillery over the last year.

Named for their toddler son, [Lion's Pride Whiskey](#), in both rye and oat varieties, will hit liquor store shelves next Saturday, each in regular and "dark" expressions. Birnecker and "brand ambassador" Meg Bell stress that the "first legal whiskey to be distilled in Chicago since Prohibition" is unlike any other aged spirit on the American market, comparing it to central European whiskey rather than to "the seven-to-eight-year-old bourbons that are so heavy you can barely lift the bottle," says Birnecker.



- [Mike Sula](#)
- Lion's Pride Oat and Dark Oat

Aged a relatively brief eight to 12 months, they have a lighter flavor and color, but "Here's the main difference," says Birnecker. "With standard distilling you have a lot of time and large stock so you can put the barrel away for four or five years, no problem. And in that time period the distillate has time to react with the charring in the barrel. Basically it gets filtered over time, so you can put a lower-quality spirit in the barrel. With craft distilling we don't have four or five years to age."

He isn't using complicated mash bills, but the same 100 percent grain formulas used in the distillery's white whiskeys, for which he leaves out the "tails," the low-alcohol distillate produced at the end of the process. Those are fine for large distillers who can use them to boost volume—prolonged time in the barrel mitigates the taste of the unwanted compounds that come with them. With Koval's white dog, "it would actually be a shame to put it in the barrel in that long."

I took some tastes and was surprised to find that I'm actually partial to the lighter, younger version of these spirits, particularly the oat variety. Each has a pronounced vanilla note, while the darker ones pick up something rougher from the oak. The rye is naturally spicier than the oat, but it's still a relatively delicate spirit, and to my taste the extra char and couple months in the barrel don't do it too many favors. But Bell says when they first tasted them out of the barrel everyone who tried them had a different preference. And soon there will be even more to taste and ponder—Koval's millet, spelt, and wheat white whiskeys are aging right now and will be released in the coming months.

The bottles will retail between \$47.99-\$49.99 when they hit liquor store shelves on November 6. On that day the distillery celebrates with a release party at [Delilah's](#) from 7 to 9 PM.