

Spirited rebirth of distilleries



Opened bottles for tasting are on display at F.E.W. Spirits, 918 Chicago Ave., in Evanston. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

3 local liquor makers revive once-thriving cottage industry

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Hidden down a dark alley in a former chop shop, skilled men are quietly violating one of Evanston's founding principles.

Frances Elizabeth Willard would not be amused.

The city's most famous female resident founded the Women's Christian Temperance Union and lived exactly a mile north of the new Chicago Avenue distillery. As one of the leading figures in the movement that brought about Prohibition — and kept Evanston dry from 1855 until 1972 — it's unlikely she'd approve of its cheeky name, either: F.E.W. Spirits.

"People say she's rolling over in her grave," distiller and owner Paul Hletko says with a coy smile. "I wouldn't know about that — the name is just a coincidence."

The words "Chicago distillery" may conjure a clichéd image of Al Capone speak-easies and bathtub whiskey, but F.E.W. is the latest example of a growing trend in craft distilleries.

When it opened earlier this year, it became the third small spirit maker in

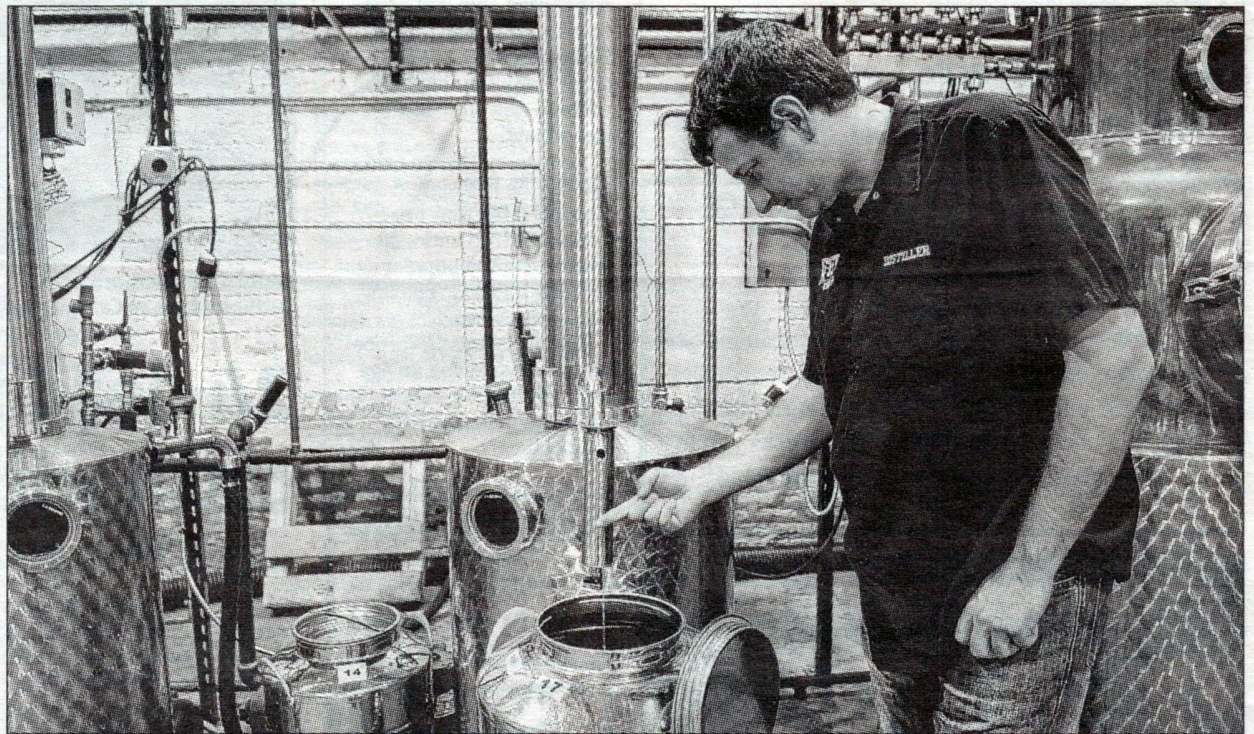
the Chicago area, following North Shore Distillery, which opened in Lake Bluff in 2004, and Koval, which opened in 2008 in Ravenswood. Two more small distilleries are expected to open soon Downstate.

It's the rebirth of a once-thriving cottage industry killed by Prohibition, made possible in part by a slight relaxation in the state's licensing laws for small operators.

Unlike the larger industrial distilleries that boast huge marketing budgets and churn out cheap booze most often mixed with Coke and Red Bull, these distillers charge a premium and rely on word of mouth to promote their handmade batches of liquor, best enjoyed neat or in classic cocktails.

"We can do different things that no large manufacturer would risk," said Hletko, who had to work with city officials for more than a year to change Evanston's laws before he could open for business.

His gin is a case in point. Infused with vanilla, citrus, cinnamon and hops from his own garden, it has a more complex character than the overpowering juniper taste he says put so many drinkers



F.E.W. Spirits founder Paul Hletko checks the flow of whiskey into a holding tank. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES



Owner Robert Birnecker pours mash in the distiller at Koval Distillery, 5121 N Ravenswood. | JEAN LACHAT-SUN-TIMES

off traditional London gin.

Distilling liquor without a license is a federal crime, raising the question of how Hletko's white whiskey — clear because it hasn't been aged in a barrel like Bourbon or Rye — could be voted world's best at the New York World Wine and Spirits Competition just two months after he opened for business.

"I'm a fast learner," he deadpans, allowing that

brewing is in his blood. His Czech grandfather spent his life trying to regain control of Pilsner Urquell after the Nazis stole it from him during World War II, Hletko said.

North Shore Distilleries co-owner Sonja Kassebaum — a former attorney, like Hletko — is a cheerful self-described "cocktail nerd" who keeps a blog about classic mixed drinks. She and her husband Derek make

two kinds of prize-winning gin, two vodkas, absinthe, a barrel-aged aquavit and specialties such as a pre-mixed Corpse Reviver.

Retro TV shows such as "Mad Men," a growing interest in locally produced, high-quality food and thriving cocktail bar and craft brewery movements are driving interest in small distilleries, she said.

"We're 10 or 15 years behind where craft beer is, but there's already a lot more understanding of what we do now than when we began," she added.

With its bubbling brass and copper still, old-fashioned jugs and flagons, hand-labeled and signed bottles, off-the-beaten path location and pet dog Sunshine wandering about, the distillery has a Willy Wonka-ish air of expertise and experimentation and heady smell of fermenting mash that's typical of all three Chicago-area operations.



Sonja Kassebaum is co-founder of North Shore Distillery in Lake Bluff. | TOM CRUZE-SUN-TIMES

It's a small and friendly community in which each is happy to sing the praises of each other's products and on site tasting rooms and tours.

"This is a culture that was in every city, but was lost with Prohibition," says Robert Birnecker, an Austrian emigre who founded Koval with his wife, Sonat, and makes two whiskeys, vodka and a range of brandies and liqueurs.

"Now it's coming back."