

and *Entrepreneurs Changed How We Drink* (Kaplan, 189 pp., \$24.95) says, such successful branding is “not an easy thing to do, considering there is nothing romantic about how vodka is made. But consumers were convinced by slick marketing and high prices that vodka was particularly exotic and valuable. The vodka companies then bolstered their appeal by using flavorings, which made the spirit more palatable and attracted new drinkers.”

Not that every distiller is on the make. When Robert and Sonat Birnecker left their comfortable jobs in Washington three years ago to open Koval, Chicago’s first boutique distillery, vodka was not exactly on their minds: “We had a very good idea in terms of fruit distillation, what we wanted to produce, but unfortunately we had missed fruit season,” says Robert, a native of Austria. “So we said we can’t wait a year and sit around and do nothing. We have to start with grains. And then we said, okay, we’ll do white whiskeys, vodka, and liqueurs”—all of which proved popular.

“We got lucky,” he adds. Koval now sells roughly 5,000 cases a year, and only about 400 of those are vodka. Robert stresses that, as artisans, he and his staff of seven do not envision producing a million-plus cases a year like Grey Goose, but something closer to 15,000-20,000. “You can go up to a certain amount of people working for you, and a certain amount of production, to still make sure everything stays at the same quality,” says Robert. “But once everything turns into a more industrial process, you lose that quality aspect, unfortunately.” Good thing the Birneckers have no intention of challenging the giants, for such a task would be nearly impossible. “Here’s the problem with the vodka market,” explains Robert.

We may have a very good vodka. But there are a lot of other forces out there on levels where we can’t compete, in terms of what distributors are able to give bars for using a certain vodka. A lot of it is “pay-to-play.” I know companies [where] you buy five cases of this flavored vodka, you get two cases or one case of the unflavored vodka for free. . . . It’s a market where, because a lot of bars think it’s flavorless and odorless, it’s all the same anyway. Why would you buy a product that’s twice as expensive as Svedka if you’re just using another margarita mix or something, you know?

(Koval Vodka costs \$39; Svedka runs about \$16.)

There’s an earnestness to the operation, which I recently toured. Their 3,000-square-foot facility in the Ravenswood-Andersonville neighborhood north of downtown Chicago will soon encompass a second building. In the same room as the vats of mash and the enormous still imported from Germany you will find a long wooden table cluttered with

papers and laptops that serves as Koval’s office. A little plastic table and chair belonging to the Birneckers’ toddler son Lion are propped next to it. “It’s his office,” jokes Robert, who also points out that the space currently housing the gift shop was once Lion’s playroom: “People thought we had day care at the distillery.” One of Koval’s most popular products is an organic whiskey called Lion’s Pride, and the Birneckers’ second son is Rye—the grain they use to distill a variety of whiskey and all of their vodka.

Michael Roper, the owner of Hopleaf, says there’s a homespun quality to Koval. He remembers when, several years ago, Sonat Birnecker entered his establishment, pushing Lion in a stroller. “She went up and down Clark Street with the baby carriage, and there were bottles underneath, where most people put their diapers and stuff,” he recalls. “It’s like someone coming in saying, ‘You want to try some of our applesauce?’ but instead, ‘You want to try our vodka?’ We’re only a couple of blocks away, so they sold it to us as a kind of neighborhood thing and it was fun.”

There is a certain intimacy within the craft distilling community. During my visit, a distiller from another state had mailed Robert

a mason jar of white whiskey hoping he could figure out what was wrong with his batch: Much like the early California wine growers, the craft distillers often share tips and secrets with each other. Three times a year the Birneckers hold seminars on distilling, each consisting of about 35 attendees from across the country. According to the American Distilling Institute, the number of craft outfits has grown from 50 in 2002 to 240 today.

But for those strictly focused on the vodka business—what Dan Aykroyd calls “only the most challenging arena in the legal recreational consumables industry”—it takes more than just a good story to move your product. “One of the lessons the industry learned from Grey Goose,” writes Noah Rothbaum, “was that consumers are impressed by reverse labels, frosted glass, and distinctive bottle shapes.” But how far does one go? A vodka contained in a glass skull or dispensed from a replica tommy gun? Wyborowa commissioned Frank Gehry to design a new bottle for its single-rye vodka.

And then there are the endorsements. Whereas Smirnoff once touted people like Groucho Marx and Woody Allen, Stolichnaya runs commercials now featuring Hugh Hefner and Julia Stiles. Americana Vodka, an upstart from Scobeyville, New Jersey (produced at Laird’s, the oldest family distillery in the nation), has quarterback Dan Marino on its side. Even value brands can garner endorsements: Sobieski,

As might be expected, America’s obsession with vodka has led to a certain pushback within the drinking community.