

Boutique distillery Koval releases Chicago's first whiskey since Prohibition

By Lauren Viera
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Whiskey isn't new to Chicago. We've been drinking the stuff for decades — centuries, even — from distilleries in Kentucky, and as far as Kilbeggan.

Chicago, however, is new to whiskey. Brand new.

November marks the first time since Prohibition, arguably earlier, that whiskey has been legally distilled and bottled in the Windy City. It comes courtesy of Koval Distillery, the mom-and-pop outfit that opened in Ravenswood last spring with several delectable liqueurs, brandies and what is sometimes called white whiskey — grain-based spirits bottled after just a few days of fermentation.

The release of aged whiskeys is a first for Chicago, and for Koval, which has been around just long enough that its barreled spirits have had time to age (just under two years, per American whiskey standards). Koval began with two varieties each of oat and rye (regular and dark); millet, wheat and spelt will follow in the coming months. There will eventually be an entire line of whiskeys. One might even call it a pride.

Dubbed Lion's Pride for Koval co-owners Sonat and Robert Bir-

necker's firstborn, the whiskeys join the tiny distillery's quickly growing line of products. (Koval now bottles more than a dozen spirits; by comparison, bourbon giant Maker's Mark only recently introduced its second product.) It's a business model that Sonat says is more European than American, based on Robert's grandfather's distillery in Austria.

"It's not just about product launching and marketing," Sonat says. "It's the art of distilling: It's really about making a great number of products and having a whole portfolio. That's the tradition that Robert comes from: His grandparents have about 15 (products)."

Koval brand ambassador Meg Bell says the company is making slightly more of its regular rye and oat whiskeys in anticipation that they may be more popular with drinkers. But coming from someone who's tried the first four of the pack, they're all quite good.

"It's a very honest spirit," Sonat said. "We feel this is a great Chicago product, and we feel like Chicago deserves a whiskey."

Koval's line of Lion's Pride whiskeys will retail locally for \$47-\$49.

Steal this recipe



Leah Eskin
Home on the Range

The young criminal launches her career in the grocery store, where she trails the shopping cart and the shopping parent. There, between apple display and pear bin, rises a mountain of yellow candy. Positioned, oddly, at young-eye height. And within young hand's

reach. She reaches, delighting in the candy's cellophane crinkle. She slips it into her mouth, then out. Butter-scotch, she learns, tastes corn-syrup, fake-butter awful. Crime, she learns, doesn't pay.

The reformed outlaw, having matured to her teenage years, learns to bake the chewy chocolate-studded blondie. "Try butterscotch," her friends goad. "Like chocolate, only blond." Yielding to peer pressure, she makes the switch. One bite yields the truth: The butterscotch chip is whey-laced, partially hydrogenated awful.

In her college years, she develops an affinity for the foil-wrapped square of imported toffee, which is the harder, fancier form of the butter-and-brown-sugar confection. Afraid of awful, she avoids association with butterscotch.

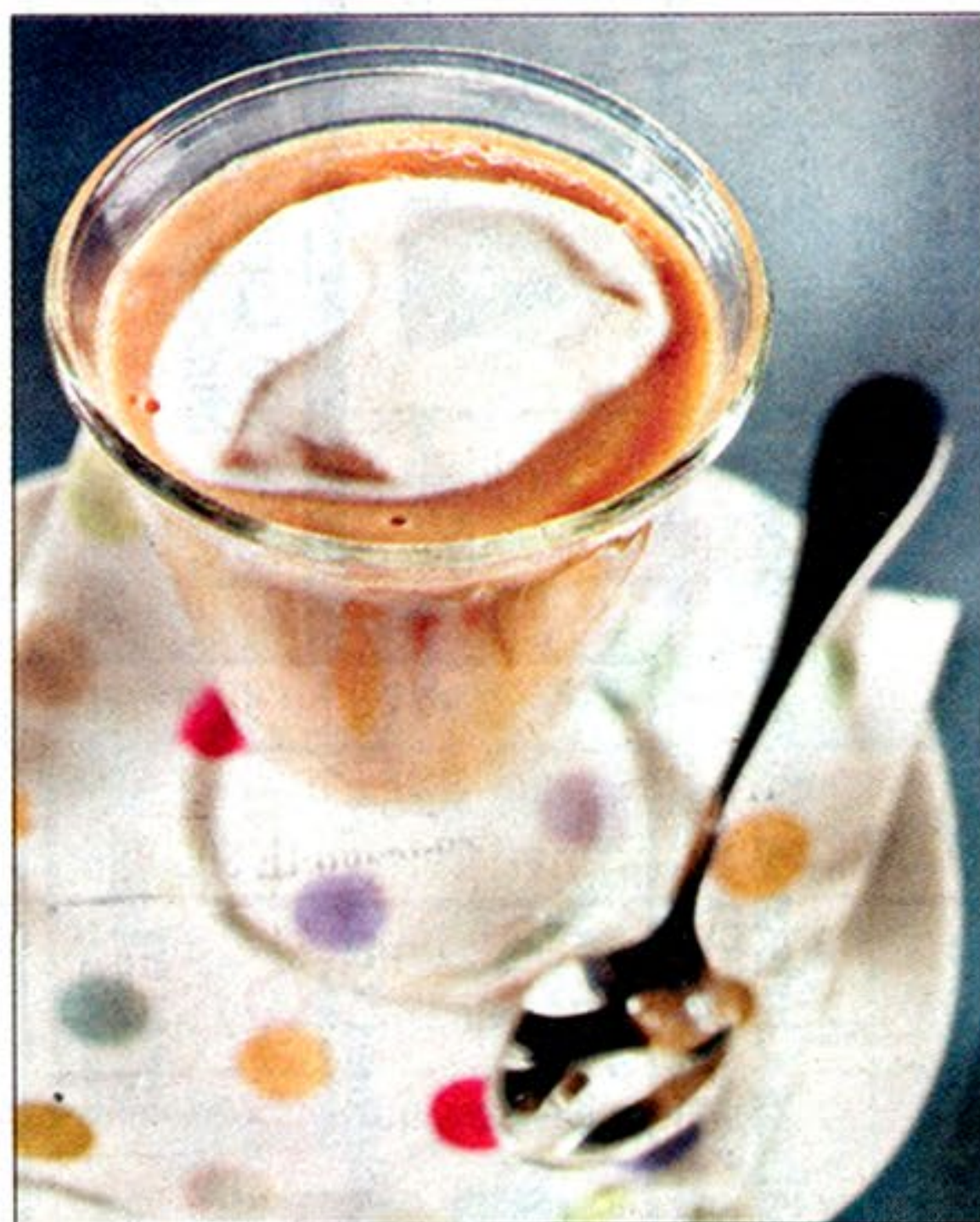
Not until well into adulthood does she brave butterscotch again. Out one night, she poaches a spoonful of butterscotch pudding. It's shockingly delicious. It tastes of butter. And — thrillingly — scotch.

Is this, she wonders, true butterscotch? The hamburger lacks ham. The doughnut lacks nut. But is butterscotch the happy amalgamation of butter and scotch?

She turns to the authorities, who claim this "scotch" refers to scoring or "scotching" the sweet. Not one to think too literally, she discards this theory and cooks up a renegade pudding sweetened with caramel, thick with butter and soothed by Scotch whisky. So good, it's practically criminal.

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Caramel butterscotch pudding

Prep: 15 minutes Cook: 20 minutes
Chill: 3 hours Makes: 12 servings

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup water
- 1/3 cup whipping cream
- 1/2 cup dark brown sugar
- 1/3 cup cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 3 cups whole milk
- 4 egg yolks
- 3/4 stick (6 tablespoons) unsalted butter, cut up
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 teaspoon Scotch whisky

1 Caramelize: Pour granulated sugar and water in a saucepan. Stir over medium heat until sugar dissolves, 2 minutes. Turn heat to high; boil, without stirring, until mixture turns a deep golden brown, 5 minutes. Pull pan off heat; carefully pour in cream (mixture will foam up). Stir smooth.

2 Boil: Measure brown sugar, cornstarch and salt into another saucepan. Whisk in milk. Stir over medium heat until thick and bubbling, 5 minutes. Pull off heat. Whisk in caramel.

3 Thicken: Whisk egg yolks. Temper by slowly whisking in 1/2 cup warm pudding mixture. Whisk yolk mixture into remaining pudding mixture. Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Whisk in the butter, vanilla and whiskey.

4 Chill: Pour into 12 demitasses. Chill 3 hours. Serve with Scotch-whisky-spiked whipped cream.

Provenance: Adapted from "Salty Sweets," by Christie Matheson.



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