



## THE STEW

A TASTE OF CHICAGO'S FOOD, WINE, AND DINING SCENE  
BY CHICAGO TRIBUNE'S GOOD EATING AND DINING S

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### **Koval launches Chicago's first whiskey since Prohibition**

*Posted by Lauren Viera*

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 those who don't know better call "white whiskeys": grain-based spirits bottled after just a few days of fermentation.

The release this week of aged whiskeys (a [launch party](#) is Saturday at Delilah's) 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 (named for Koval co-owners Sonat and Robert Birnecker's first born), 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. Period.) 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). And if you go to any similar distilleries in Austria, they probably have a restaurant and maybe even 35 different spirits. They're people who care about the craft itself. It's not just about producing one thing and making as much as you can."

Koval brand ambassador Meg Bell says the company is making slightly more of its regular rye and oat whiskey 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.

*Bill Hogan/Tribune photo*