



# WHISKEY: Aged in Chicago

Maranda Bodas



**P**remium craft whiskey, Master distillers say, is all about the heart. Sonat and Robert Birnecker, founders of Ravenswood’s Koval Distillery, are proof.

In 2008, the husband-and-wife duo ditched their comfortable academic careers in Washington DC to launch the first distillery in Chicago since the mid-1800s.

The decision was easy, according to Sonat. “We wanted a different lifestyle,” she said. “One that allowed us to work together, and one that allowed us to make something with our hands from scratch in a city we loved.”

For Robert, who came from generations of Austrian distillers, saw it as a chance to carry on a legacy. “It was something he grew up doing and making whiskey in the tradition of his family was the way to achieve the lifestyle change we sought, while doing something fun,” Sonat said.



Listen to Sonat talk about what makes KOVAL a family business.



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oday, the 17-person team churns out six premium whiskeys, seven signature liqueurs, and five unique spirits. With a rye whiskey that took first place at the Whisky International in 2013, and a liqueur infused with fresh hand-peeled ginger, the Koval brand is gaining global attention — and demand.

Robert started his first batch of unaged white rye in a small warehouse with 300-liter still, but moved to the company's current 10,000-square-foot facility just three years later. Now business is booming and Sonat and her husband don't show any signs of stopping. Last year they purchased a 5,000-liter still and three additional fermenters in order to keep up with production and will be in the market for another 1000-liter still to accommodate the release of Koval's first gin this year.

The company's rapid growth mirrors the industry as a whole. According to Bill Owens, president of the American Distilling Institute, more than 500 distilleries have opened across the U.S. over the past 10 years.

“The only thing slowing us down is a shortage of barrels and education,” Owens said. “The interest is there but there are very few places where you can learn the craft.”



Listen to how  
KOVAL got its  
name.



**E**stablishing Chicago's distillery market meant some heavy lifting for the Birneckers.

As pioneers the couple had to address prohibition-era laws that forbid spirit manufacturers from having a tasting room or store on site.

"We had to be very diligent," Sonat said. "It was all just part of being the first."

Over the past six years, a handful of distillers have followed in Koval's footsteps to open up shop along Chicago's shoreline. "We sure do have competition, but we don't see other craft brands as competition but rather as fellow members of a movement to offer something beyond merely a brand" Sonat said.

Over the past five years they have consulted for and trained more than 1,500 young distillers, and have set up nearly 60 distilleries across North America. Since opening, the team has helped launch more than one third of all the craft distilleries in the U.S. and Canada.

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This is a small industry, primarily with people who are passionate about their art,” said Paul Hletko a distiller at FEW Spirits out of Evanston. “We’re quite good friends with the folks at Koval, and they have certainly helped us get started and along the way.”

Bill Welter, owner and distiller at Journeyman out of Three Oaks, Mich., turned to Robert when he needed a facility to age his first batch of rye whiskey. Robert opened his doors, and his still, to Welter. And in 2010, Journeyman was able to open with a true aged whiskey, aptly named Ravenswood Rye.

“Robert, in a lot of ways, has been the frontrunner for craft distilling in the Midwest,” Welter said.

“I think he’s been very beneficial for the art of the craft.”



Listen to find out how KOVAL has helped other distilleries throughout the country.



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onat and Robert expect 2014 to bring even more growth. From a modest start in Illinois to international distribution across eight countries and 26 states, they are already growing out of their Ravenswood home. This rapid growth, the distillers say, has proven to be their biggest struggle.

“We’ve always tried to stay a few steps ahead of where we think the business is going but sometimes it is difficult to assess just how quickly those things can change and require more output,” Sonat said. “It is a good problem to have.”



Dr. Sonat Birnecker Hart  
President, KOVAL Distillery



Dr. Robert Birnecker  
Master Distiller & CEO

