

Gin Yummy

THE NORTH SHORE GETS ITS FIRST CRAFT DISTILLERY

By Terry Sullivan

The next U.S. census is going to show that the North Shore of Chicago has one less lawyer and one less consultant, and has added two more distillers. This is called progress.

Not that there's anything wrong with lawyers and consultants (I didn't mean that in no bad way, as they say in New York), but we could use more distillers in the neighborhood, since we had approximately none until last autumn.

Which is when Derek and Sonja Kassebaum cranked up their new German copper pot at the North Shore Distillery on the industrial outskirts of Lake Bluff. Derek, a chemical engineer, was the consultant; Sonja was the lawyer. Together they decided that maybe there was a way to use those skills to do the Lord's work. Their operation is the first craft distillery (or micro-distillery, or artisanal distillery, pick one) in the state of Illinois, part of a growing movement, like the wine and beer revolution, born in the Pacific Northwest a while back.

Their first products are on the shelves: the aptly named North Shore Vodka and a slick thing called Distiller's Gin No. 6. The vodka's a brisk, bright tot, with a very soft finish. The gin is lightly piney (the mandatory juniper) with a touch of astringency, a very light hint of anise and flowers, and a long, long sweet finish. In addition to that juniper and anise seed (the star anise proved too powerful, Derek says — presumably in one of the first five tries) and the secret herbs and spices that they're not talking about, you'll taste lemon, coriander, cardamom, Ceylon, cinnamon and, wait for it — lavender. Call it gin Provencale.



And they're ambitious. As befits a chemical engineer, Derek is looking to make brandies and whiskey down the road. For the moment, they're not technically making alcohol but are classified as processors. This frees them up, under Illinois law, to be their own distributors (Sonja's assignment) but lets them buy neutral grain spirits and make vodka and gin.

Aside time: This is what most vodka producers do. There are, folks, only a very small handful of ethyl alcohol (grain spirit) distillers in the country. Vodka makers buy this give-or-take 190-proof odorless, colorless, tasteless spirit and then re-distill it (sometimes), filter it and add water and occasional flavors to make vodka. Some of the best tongues in the spirit game believe the principal differences in many vodkas is tied to the water that dilutes it.

To make the gin, Derek and Sonja prepare botanicals (they were zesting lemons at the desk the day I was there), blend and macerate them in the neutral spirit and re-distill the spirit before using your local Lake Michigan fluid to reduce the strength to a drinkable proof. (This might account for that soft, clean finish.)

Until they can add more products, they're doing noble experiments with gin, aquavit and liqueurs. The aquavit experiment I tasted was light on the usual caraway (yes, that's why aquavit reminds you of rye bread) and long on cinnamon. And tasty. The blueberry gin was soft and sweet and the date infusion, which sounds nutty, was literally nutty — as in redolent of sweet nuts — and could be a winner. The Earl Grey-infused gin, while not my cup of Mother's Ruin, is dead center on the marketing front — tea flavors are very hot on the cocktail horizon. The best of the stuff in the testing lab (it shares a small table with the labeling department — this is a genuine mom and pop operation) was Gin Number 11. Very old fashioned, like the gins of our fathers, with the floral notes left out and a heady extra dose of juniper. It would make a doozy of a throwback martini, as they were before all the citrus and pepper and berries came along.

Your assignment: We need to encourage these folks, not just because they're locals, but so they'll become successful enough to have a place with giant copper pot stills and distillery tours, and a shop where they, like the Scots and Irish, will have a distillery special that can only be bought on-site — like Old Middleton Irish Whiskey, which you have to fly to Ireland, rent a car and drive half a day to purchase.

In a justly ordered universe, there'll be this gin, or whiskey, or brandy, that you can get just down the road, but your friends on the coast can only dream of. Meanwhile, go to their Web site and tell them to get that Number 11 in the van and out the door. I'm thirsty.