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Interpreting absinthe

Lake Bluff micro-distillery recreates legendary liqueur

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In the old movies where moonshiners carried out their work in the cover of the woods, running a still seems like such a leisurely activity. The hand-wound copper coils gurgle and drip slowly into a waiting clay jug.

Derek Kassebaum's gin mill is no backwoods contraption, however. The 2-ton electrically heated pot and condenser tower is a tribute to German engineering efficiency, and when it gets going, alcohol flows from a spout like water from a kitchen tap left wide open.

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Derek Kassebaum, master distiller of the North Shore Distillery in Lake Bluff, empties a 5-gallon carboy full of freshly distilled absinthe into a container where it awaits the herbs that will add flavor and the characteristic green color of the once illegal liquor.
(Michael Jarecki for Pioneer Press)

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Sirene (right), a bottle of absinthe, sits next to other liquors that the North Shore Distillery produces.
(Michael Jarecki for Pioneer Press)

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The stream of clear booze quickly fills a 5-gallon glass jug, and Kassebaum has to move fast, slipping a funnel into the flow to divert it into another jug while scooting the heavy filled one to the side. He manages to do it without spilling a drop.

He lifts the full carboy, a vessel similar to those perched atop office water coolers, and dumps it into a large white mixing tank, where it will steep with dried herbs, taking on a deep emerald/olive hue. The whole room in the converted warehouse space smells of licorice and mint and something woody, like herbal tea with a 150-proof kick.

Inspirational drink

Kassebaum is cooking up a batch of absinthe, the potent and highly aromatic liquor that inspired 19th century artists and poets before being banned virtually everywhere by World War I.

After a decade of resurgence in Europe and determined efforts by devotees to clear absinthe's reputation as a neurotoxic beverage, it was effectively re-legalized in the United States last year for the first time since 1912.

Kassebaum's North Shore Distillery, a 3-year old startup spirits company in Lake Bluff, is the second domestic distiller to produce an absinthe, and their offering, Sirene, is getting strong marks from critics.

Tucked away in an industrial park near the tollway, the one-still, husband and wife micro-distillery has built its reputation with a line of botanical-infused gins and vodkas, and absinthe was an irresistible challenge for Kassebaum, a chemical engineer with a chef's heart for experimentation. He tinkered with a formula and many herbs before

rolling out the brand in May.

Complex of flavors

"My goal has always been to have our own interpretation of the spirit. We love the idea of a complexity of flavor, and I really tried to come up with an absinthe that had a lot going on," Kassebaum said.

Absinthe has a licorice-type flavor from anise and fennel and an earthy bitterness from the herb wormwood, absinthe's defining ingredient and the one that was blamed for its supposed ill effects a century ago. Starting with those three ingredients, each distiller comes up with their own signature, and secret blend of culinary herbs and spices to add layers of flavor to the beverage -- hyssop, coriander, lemon balm, peppermint.

The end product is supposed to have a certain visual effect in a glass, what the French termed the "louche" clouding when water is added, and the many flavors have to mesh with each other, Kassebaum said.

Distilling is equal parts art and science. The still heats the slurry of herbs and high-proof beverage alcohol and one by one, the alcohol and many different plant oils and essences evaporate and percolate over the condenser, leaving behind the most acrid, bitter and heavy flavors.

Getting it right

Kassebaum has digital readouts and a device to monitor proof, but experience and a trained palate also come into play. He knows to stop the run when the distillate's flavor starts getting too heavy or light. The same goes for coloring. The time to get it right varies by temperature, and Kassebaum has to watch carefully.

"Handcrafted" isn't a folksy marketing gambit for North Shore Distillery. Kassebaum and his 60-gallon still are the entire production department as well as product development. A dozen paces to the left is the shipping dock, and a few steps the other way is the bottling plant, a pair of wide tables next to a filter and pump apparatus not much larger than a food processor.

He has one assistant doing the work of filling the bottles and sealing the tops with wax. That operation shares a wall with the corporate office. Labeling is done by a team of at-home moms and a grandmother.

It's all very labor intensive, but that's the Kassebaum's business model. Derek, a chemical engineer and business consultant, and Sonja Kassebaum, a tax attorney, jumped off the corporate treadmill into this venture in 2005 because they wanted to do something more fun and they saw an opportunity.

Filling a niche

If microbreweries could revolutionize the market with interesting small batch beer, why not do the same for distilled liquor?

The Gurnee couple had plenty of experience with homebrewing, and Derek learned the distillers art in college, although his expertise was geared toward petroleum.

Starting up a distillery was no simple task, in part because of a thicket of state and federal licensing regulations governing the operation of a still and the taxes that are collected on every drop produced. Because of the difficulty, few people had done it, leaving a relatively unexploited niche for the Kassebaums.

"The liquor industry is just like beer used to be, it's dominated by big players doing very mainstream stuff," Sonja Kassebaum said. "We decided we wanted to do something we'd be excited to get up and do every day."

Their niche is rich and complex botanical liquors made with real ingredients, not extracts or artificial surrogates. Along with absinthe, they produce a Tahitian vanilla vodka, a gin loaded with flavors besides juniper and an aquavit, a Scandinavian favorite dominated by caraway.

Small pleasures

They also do a limited-release product each summer -- gins infused with dates, Ceylon tea, fresh rhubarb or this year, mangoes. Those runs are maybe a couple hundred bottles.

"That's what's fun about being small. We can make a batch of something that's two or three hundred bottles and sell it," Derek said.

Their products, in about 250 locations in Illinois and surrounding states, have won the praise of critics and several industry awards.

Sirene won favorable reviews on two of the largest online absinthe forums, Fee Verte and the Wormwood Society. It's a tough crowd to impress, given that some of them, like Brian Robinson of the Wormwood Society, have tasted hundreds, including vintage French brands worth thousands of dollars a bottle.

"I like it (Sirene). I think it's probably as close to traditional as you can find in the states right now," Robinson said.