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## Spirited couple

BY KIMBERLY STOCKWELL

CORRESPONDENT

With the widely held belief that 90 percent of start-ups fail in the first year and with a high percentage of Americans couples divorced, Derek and Sonja Kassebaum have the odds stacked against them.

But don't tell that to the spirited couple who are both partners in life and co-founders of North Shore Distillery just outside of Lake Bluff, the state's first bonded and licensed distillery. Located in an industrial park near the I-94 toll road and Lamb's Farm, Derek, 36, and Sonja, 34, formed the company 14 months ago.

Derek, who has a degree in chemical engineering from the Colorado School of Mines, and his wife Sonja, who has a law degree from University of Michigan, have leapt from hobbyists who home-brewed beer to managers of a micro-distillery that produces two flagship spirits: Distiller's Gin No. 6 and North Shore Vodka. The Gurnee couple began selling gin and vodka this past fall amidst a whirlwind of bartender training sessions, store tastings and newsletter writing.

"Things are going even better than we initially thought they would," said Sonja, who jettisoned a department head position in human resources and now handles the marketing and legal work.

"We're working well together," added Derek, who left his career as a telecommunications consultant to run the team's operations and accounting.

They met at college in Golden, Colo. -- where, incidentally, Coors Beer is bottled. One of their "dates" was a tour of the facility. They've been married for 14 years.

Sonja's legal expertise is critical to the success of the business with its mountains of federal and state paperwork filing requirements in a closely regulated business.

"Many of the forms we need to file date back to the 1930's created in response to the end of Prohibition," explained Sonja. Both the federal government and the State of Illinois tax each wholesale bottle sold.

"There's a strict system in place with cumbersome rules," she said. "We are required to sell (each bottle) at the same price to every distributor. I can't

give it away and I can't move it once it's on a retail store shelf."

Derek's chemical engineering background is equally important to production. Derek "crafts" their gin and blind taste-tested many recipes on Sonja before coming up with the exact combination of "botanicals" (fresh fruit extracts and herbs) to satisfy her discerning taste.

While not looking for her approval, Derek knows that his wife would provide the necessary feedback to determine the winning combination.

"We looked at over 25 spices for the gin," recalls Derek, "before settling on the final recipe." Large glass spice jars line one shelf in their office next to the first bottle of gin and vodka to come off the production line.

Both North Shore Distillery gin and vodka are derived from the same spirit base-liquor purchased from a downstate producer/business partner. The couple purchased a copper still from Germany that boils the base, cools it and then collects the by-product through a reboiler, condenser and receiver.

Distiller's Gin No. 6 is the firm's "flagship product". It tastes like a mini-symphony in one's mouth: The prologue is an anise smell quickly followed by a scherzo of cardamom, a rondo of lavender and then back to a coda of juniper. Sonja refers to the flavor as "complex". The blended botanicals are a special combination of cardamom, lavender and cinnamon. Juniper berries are required to call the product gin.

If gin is about what goes into a liquor, vodka is about what's taken out. The Kassebaums take the same spirit base-liquor and purify it through a charcoal filtering system to produce an ultra-smooth vodka. "The result is a clean, smooth taste," boasted Derek. With this process, they hope to prove a great vodka does not have to be imported to be good.

Much thought has gone into the bottle design and product logo with the Kassebaums taking the best art work from three graphic designers before settling on the final design. The vodka label has a retro-designed martini glass with skewered olives in a see-through bottle emphasizing the product's purity. The gin label features a frosted cutout panel on the front with the same martini glass on the bottle back offering what's been added to the gin.


The Kassebaums hope they have properly read the market trend for specialty, small batch distilling in America as seen with the success of microbrewing beer and small family owned wineries and are ahead of it.

"We believe there is a renaissance in distilling," said Sonja. "When we attended our first distiller's conference, most of the attendees would not share information with us or even admit that they were distillers. The liquor business is very secretive this way with recipes closely guarded."

They plan to expand their product line after taking a look at initial sales this winter. "Almost 50 percent of spirit sales are made between Halloween and New Year's Eve," said Sonja.

Distiller's Gin No. 6 and North Shore Vodka may be found in specialty liquor stores, fine bars and restaurants. Bottles are priced at \$30.69 for a 750 liter bottle at Sunset Foods. Check their Web site, [www.northshoredistillery.com](http://www.northshoredistillery.com), for information on upcoming tasting events, to join their Distiller's Club or to

share favorite recipes.

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