

FEATURE STORY — May/June 2008

That's the Spirit

Derek Kassebaum abandoned a consulting career to pursue his true passion: creating high-end, hand-crafted spirits. His boutique distillery now produces some of the nation's most highly regarded gins and vodkas

By Rachell Farrell
Photography by Lloyd DeGrane

One afternoon in spring 2004, **Derek Kassebaum**, MBA '00 was flipping through *American Distiller: The Journal of Distillation* when he came across an article written by the founder of a successful Vermont-based vodka distillery. The founder, Kassebaum read, started the company after he and his wife quit their jobs and moved to a farm in St. Johnsbury, where they concocted the idea of making vodka out of maple sap.

"That firmed things up," says Kassebaum, explaining that he and his wife Sonja had already toyed with the idea of quitting their jobs (he was a consultant, she was a lawyer) to start a boutique distillery in the Chicago area. Kassebaum had "always liked the idea of making a product ... something you could see on the shelf," and loved learning about spirits and making beer and wine in his home. Plus, he had studied the distillation process as an undergraduate at the Colorado School of Mines, a small engineering college not far from the Coors beer plant.

Within six months, Kassebaum's business was up-and-running in the North Shore suburb of Lake Bluff, where it still resides today in a small warehouse on Herky Drive. Aptly named North Shore Distillery, it's the state's first and only boutique distillery—and one of the only small-scale distilleries located in the Midwest. Along with its signature products (Distiller's Gin No. 6, Distiller's Gin No. 11 and North Shore Vodka), North Shore Distillery has rolled out several limited release spirits, such as gin infused with medjool dates and Ceylon tea, and unusual products like aquavit, a Scandinavian spirit that until now wasn't produced in the United States.



Derek Kassebaum's hand-crafted spirits have won several awards, including a Gold Medal from the Beverage Testing Institute in 2006 and Gold Medal from the San Francisco World Spirits Competition in 2007.

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As quickly as it sprung up on the market, North Shore Distillery has gained a remarkable following—particularly after its spirits hit the shelves at popular retailers such as Binny's Beverage Depot and Sam's Wines & Spirits, and showed up in signature cocktails at Chicago's Weber Grill and Spring Restaurant.

The spirits have also garnered rave reviews and awards: Distiller's Gin No. 6 was named

"Best Gin" by Chicago magazine in 2007 and received the Beverage Testing Institute's Gold Medal in 2006; North Shore Vodka received a five-star rating from Backlit Vodka Lounge in 2007; and Acquavit Private Reserve won a Gold Medal at the 2007 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Despite North Shore Distillery's growing popularity, Kassebaum has managed to keep his business running smoothly with a staff of three, which includes himself, his wife and a part-time employee. In between hand-crafting batches of spirits, he pays the bills, answers phone calls and conducts tastings at bars and restaurants in the Chicago area. "But I'd rather spend my time coming up with something new than trying to sell what we already have," he says. "I like going to the produce section of the market, picking up stuff and saying, 'Let's try this.' Last year, our limited release was a gin with rhubarb ginger infusion ... because I grabbed some rhubarb and started playing with it."

Engaging in this creative process and producing something "artistic," Kassebaum says, is really his ultimate objective. "We've always said that we're not out to take over the world and become a national brand," he explains. "Our goal has been to have an extensive portfolio of all kinds of spirits."