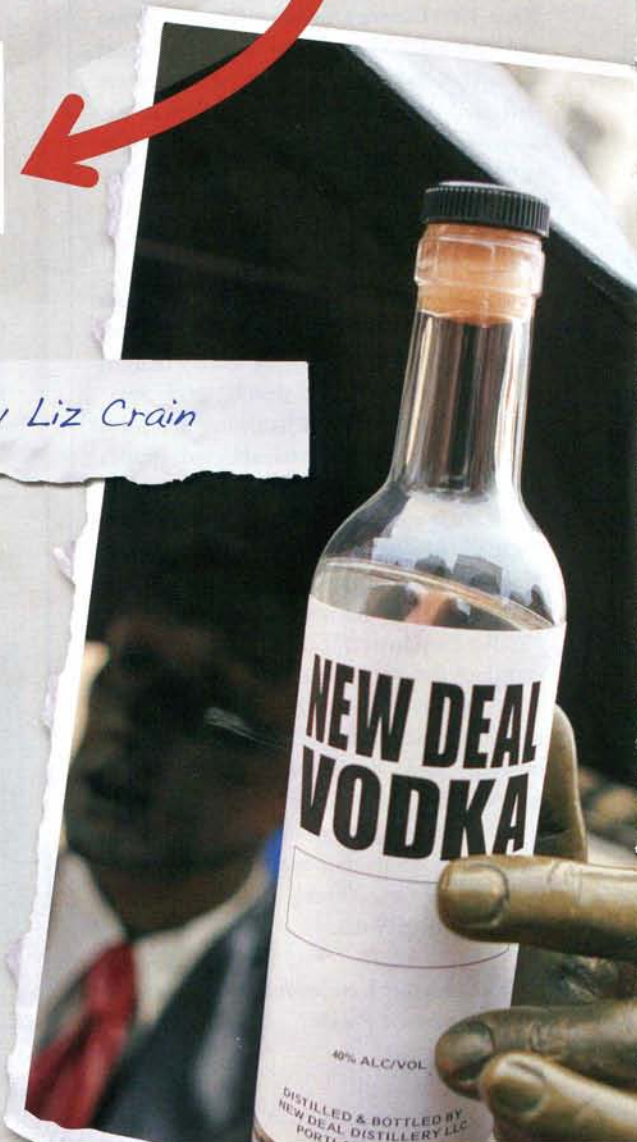




Spirits Soaring in Portland



By Liz Crain



*In Oregon's expanding universe
of small-batch distilling,
Portland is a supernova*

Native Oregonian Kieran Sienkiewicz remembers exactly when he decided to become a distiller.

It wasn't after tasting a standout spirit and it wasn't while brewing beer and considering the logical progression to distillation. His epiphany took place during a less-likely activity—watching TV.

Sienkiewicz, a longtime fan of the TV series *M*A*S*H*, thought to himself while watching an episode several years ago, "If Hawkeye Pierce and Trapper John can distill liquor in a homemade still in the Swamp [their tent], then I can, too."

Sienkiewicz learned the craft of distillation while working at the Rogue Distillery and Public House in Portland from 2005 to early 2007, where he won 16 medals for spirits he crafted. Now Sienkiewicz and partner Rich Phillips are raising the roof of **Integrity Spirits** by building-out an old bar in an industrial section of Southeast Portland. The distillery, which plans to produce everything from vodka and gin to (legal) absinthe, is part of the newly opened Green Dragon Bistro & Brewpub (the bistro and brewpub are separately owned), where local spirits will partner up with local beer and grub.

Integrity Spirits is far from alone. The by-your-bootstraps Portland spirits scene is now eight distilleries strong. In fact, the spirits movement is so concentrated in the Rose City that there is an area in inner Southeast Portland known as Distillery Row, where four distilling facilities reside within several blocks of one another.

Lee Medoff, distiller and co-owner of the four-year-old distillery **House Spirits** (several blocks south of Integrity), and president of the less-than-a-year-old Oregon Distillers Guild, likens Portland's—and the whole state's—spirits climate to that of the early years of Oregon craft brewing and winemaking.

"We're trying to get the word out that Oregon is where distillation happens," says Medoff. "I really like the fact that we're all doing such different things. We're not going to be known for one thing, like Kentucky is known for bourbon. We're going to be known for the whole spectrum of spirits, and up to this point, nowhere in the country has had that kind of diversity."

In 2004, Medoff and partner Christian Krogstad, both former brewers for Edgefield Distillery in Troutdale, OR began distilling in the same facility as Tad Seestedt's **Ransom Spirits** in Corvallis, OR. A year later, both distilleries moved to a larger shared facility in Portland. Although Seestedt distills only about 12 times a year, since 1997 he's managed to produce a wide variety of small-batch spirits including several grappas, with plans to branch out ►



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Integrity Spirits' Kieran Sienkiewicz (above) and Rich Phillips (right).



(L-R) Leif Pietila (sales & marketing) with distillers Lee Medoff and Christian Krogstad of House Spirits.

SARAH BAGLEY PHOTO

Crafting gin is like steeping tea

"We take all the herbs and spices and put them into a big bag, like you're making tea. We throw that into our base liquor on a Friday afternoon and let it sit all weekend. On Monday, we'll pump up the still and then distill it. After that, we cut it down to the right strength with distilled water."

—Lee Medoff, House Spirits

into gin and whiskey in the near future.

House Spirits products currently include Medoyeff Vodka, Aviation Gin, and Krogstad Aquavit—roughly 350 cases a month and growing. Most top Portland restaurants and bars carry one or more of these spirits. You'll also find them in Seattle, San Francisco, and New York, at esteemed venues such as the Gramercy Tavern and The Modern. Although the company's biggest seller is Aviation Gin, followed by Medoyeff

Vodka, Medoff and Krogstad have wanted to craft whiskey for years, and now they finally are. They're involving their customers in the process, too—see "Whisk(e)y Your Way," below.

Although many startups prefer to produce clear spirits because they take days or weeks to age, unlike dark spirits such as whiskey that require years in the barrel, Medoff disagrees with the assertion that

making vodka is elementary or uncomplicated. In terms of flavor profiles, he says, "If you were to get all the local vodkas together side-by-side they all taste very different. My family is Russian, so the style of vodka I make is Eastern European. In Eastern Europe there's no cocktail culture, so they drink everything straight. Vodkas there tend to be richer and heavier with more flavor and mouthfeel."

Mike Sherwood's **Sub Rosa Spirits**, which are produced at House Spirits, is taking vodka flavor a step further with culinary infusions. A past executive director of the Oregon Brewers Guild and co-founder of the Oregon Distillers Guild, Sherwood is a puckish former software designer who used to work with Kieran Sienkiewicz at Rogue Distillery in producing white and dark rums and various "flavor experiments," as Sherwood puts it.

When not working at Oregon's Sineann Winery, Sherwood collaborates with Linda Lausmann on infused spirits. In October 2007 they released their two inaugural Sub Rosa vodkas. One gets its pale chartreuse hue from saffron; the other its faintly green tint from tarragon. Each batch is numbered and dated to reflect variations that, says Sherwood, "are a part

Whisk(e)y Your Way

If you're a whiskey lover—and a bit of a control freak—House Spirits' Whisk(e)y Your Way program could be just what the doctor ordered.

Participants in the program, which commenced this summer, attend an initial seminar and whiskey tasting that runs the gamut from bourbon to Irish whiskey. Then they meet with co-proprietor Lee Medoff in one-on-one consultations to determine the ingredients and barrel type for their very own custom-crafted whiskey.

(By the way, the spelling "whisky" is generally used for whiskies distilled in Scotland, Wales, Canada, and Japan, while "whiskey" is used for the spirits distilled in Ireland. "Whisky" is also the approved U.S. spelling, but many U.S. distilleries add that Irish "e" anyway.)

"We've found that a lot of people who love whiskey don't know anything about it," says Medoff. "Trying them all side by side in our seminars, they get a really good idea of all the different styles."

After the initial tasting, participants meet with Medoff to select their whiskey's "grain bill," i.e., the proportion of malted barley, rye, wheat, corn, oats, and peated malt that will be used in the fermenting mash. They also select the type of barrel the whiskey will be aged in: Oregon, Midwest, or French oak, toasted in varying degrees.

"You can go to a distillery in Scotland or even in Kentucky and you can buy a barrel of whiskey, but it will be no different than what someone can buy off the shelf," Medoff notes. "With our program, you can have one-of-a-kind whiskey. Right now, one Whisk(e)y Your Way barrel is 100% malted barley, another is a bourbon made with corn, wheat, and barley. And this weekend, I'm working with someone who wants mainly rye."

After the whiskey is barreled, in quantities ranging from 15 to 60 gallons, participants can come to the distillery yearly to check on it. When their barrel is finally at its best, House Spirits will bottle and label it.

Costs vary according to the desired volume, ingredients, and barrel, but start around \$4,900. To learn more, call 503-235-3174 or click housespirits.com.

—Liz Crain