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# COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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## Microdistillery seeking OK to sip on site

Business First of Columbus - by [Dan Eaton](#)

Middle West Spirits LLC has the microdistillery market cornered, but its owners wouldn't mind a little competition if the state would allow it.

Brady Konya and Ryan Lang this month began selling their Oyo-brand vodka from the pair's 3,200-square-foot Short North distillery. The launch marked the culmination of three years of work – not just mastering the distilling process, but also securing financial and state regulatory backing. They hope to show the state that the burgeoning microdistillery trade is worth nurturing.

"We're proof of concept for the state in what could be a new, cool craft category," Konya said. "It's exciting to try to champion the concept here."

Middle West holds one of only three A-3a liquor licenses available in Ohio. The category was created in 2008 for businesses that produce up to 10,000 gallons of liquor a year and have on-site sales – but only in counties with populations over 800,000, which limits the permits to Franklin, Hamilton and Cuyahoga counties. And only one permit is allowed per county. Woodstone Creek Winery & Distillery in Cincinnati has the Hamilton County permit, while Cuyahoga's license remains unclaimed.

Middle West Spirits is regarded as a quasi-state liquor agency, so the law does not allow tastings at its distillery without a special permit, which Konya said it must obtain every time it hosts a tasting event. It is a hurdle they hope to see removed.

"This is a new, unique venture," said Ernie Davis, Ohio Division of Liquor Control's acting superintendent. "We're having ongoing conversations with Middle West. We're trying to come up with a way to allow them to do what they need to do."

Davis said Liquor Control prefers to find a way within existing regulations to let Middle West host tastings and provide cocktail service. Konya and Lang said they may pursue statutory changes but hope a quicker, easier solution can be found.

"They understand the limitations," Lang said of regulators. "They're working to make it friendlier."

### Overcoming a legacy

The distilling industry has a history that makes it difficult to loosen regulations, namely the image of gin joints and bootleggers from the Prohibition era.

"Distilling has an outlaw motif," said Distinguished Professor Kris Berglund, director of Michigan State University's Artisan Distilling Program. "When you say you work in distilling, you get a knowing smile and a little chuckle. But this isn't moonshine. It's kinda funny, but it's difficult to shake."

Ohio's law is comparatively restrictive, he said. Michigan's microdistillery license is \$100 and allows for the production of up to 60,000 gallons annually with on-site sales by the bottle or case, as well as drinking. Servers must pass a certification course. New York state's rules are similar to Michigan's, Berglund said, with an added requirement that 50 percent of ingredients must come from the state. Washington state is similar as well.

Berglund estimated 150 to 200 microdistilleries operate nationally. Michigan has 14.

"It's a pretty clean industry," he said. "It isn't the Wild West."

Microdistilleries are most popular in Western states such as California, Washington and Oregon, Konya said. They have an obvious appeal in regions where microbreweries and wineries are popular, he said, and where visitors are familiar with touring production plants, listening to the experts and tastings.

Establishing a mass of distilleries could bring commerce and character to a community in the same way microbreweries and wineries do, Konya said.

Berglund said states often are concerned about the perception that reduced alcohol regulations will encourage consumption, but that isn't the reality with most microdistilleries.



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“They’re not making cheap stuff,” he said. “They can’t afford to. The practice just doesn’t lend itself to that.”

#### **Vodka has a taste**

Middle West’s first product is the vodka labeled Oyo – Iroquois for “beautiful river” and the word that gave Ohio its name. Oyo (pronounced Oh-Why-Oh) is made with soft red winter wheat grown in the state and sells in the premium category at \$35 a bottle. Lang said it is European style, with heightened natural flavor.

The vodka has no chemical additives or premade solutions, Lang said. The duo consulted with grain science experts at Ohio State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture on what ingredients would best balance taste and efficiency. They plan to source the majority of ingredients from Ohio, Konya said.

“Ohio has a nest egg of things for us to bottle,” Lang said, such as wheat, rye, spelt and potatoes.

Middle West plans to roll out other liquors, including whiskey, gin and seasonally infused vodkas.

“We’ll be more diversified in a year,” Lang said.

Konya said Middle West strives to be regarded as the “Jeni’s of vodka,” a reference to Columbus-based Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams, a popular and expanding artisan ice cream chain. Oyo is in most state-licensed liquor stores in Central Ohio and is making its way to area bars and restaurants. It could be in stores across the state by year-end.

Konya and Lang declined to detail their sales projections for the business.

One step in the state licensing process was to prove interest. Konya said Middle West secured more than 100 letters of support from restaurants and prospective customers. He said the Short North was an attractive site for the microdistillery because it is a creative, entrepreneurial community.

Peter Merkle of NAI Ohio Equities LLC brokered the deal on Middle West’s site at 1230 Courtland Ave.

#### **Middle West Spirits LLC**

- Business: Microdistillery that produces Oyo Vodka
- Based: Columbus
- Owners: Brady Konya, Ryan Lang
- Employees: 4
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