

A spirited endeavor

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Two new Columbus distilleries put lightning in a local bottle

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By [Robin Davis](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Looking for a Christmas present for her brother, Connie Trein opted for a stylish bottle of OYO vodka made by Middle West Spirits near the Short North.

"I heard about it from friends," said Trein, 46, of the South Side.

"I was surprised to hear there was a distillery in Columbus."

In fact, Columbus has two distilleries -- both of which opened last year.

In addition to Middle West Spirits, in business since July, Watershed Distillery near Grandview Heights started selling gin and vodka in December.

The small operations are among only four micro-distillers in Ohio but a growing number nationally -- more than 250, or a 25 percent increase from 2009, said Bill Owens, president and founder of the American Distilling Institute in Hayward, Calif.

A micro-distiller, he said, is defined as one that makes 60,000 proof gallons (gallons with 50 percent alcohol) or fewer a year.

By comparison, Absolut Vodka produces more than 2 million proof gallons a year.

Another comparison: At full capacity, Watershed makes about 23,400 bottles of vodka a year; and Absolut, 600,000 bottles a day.



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OYO vodka



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Co-owner Brady Konya, explaining the distillation process during a Middle West Spirits tour

The interest in small distillers, Owens said, is traced to the movement to buy, eat and drink local products.

Spirits are arriving last to the party, it seems, because home distilling is illegal.

"Home brewers were the springboard for craft beer," Owens said. "We don't have that with distillers."

Indeed, the "local" movement inspired the Columbus distilleries.

"I lived in Switzerland, played professional volleyball," said Greg Lehman, head distiller and co-owner of Watershed.

"The town I was in had local everything: soft drinks, cheeses, spirits."

Upon his return to the United States in 2003, he noticed that he couldn't buy only local products.

"My buddies and I were taken by the fact that there were a lot of microbrews in Columbus but no spirits."

Brady Konya and Ryan Lang, co-owners of Middle West Spirits, sought to make spirits not only in Ohio but also with as many Ohio ingredients as possible.

"We wanted to make a vodka with a distinct sense of place," Konya said. "If you're going to produce something with a distinct sense of place, it has to be sourced locally."

Middle West buys soft red winter wheat grown and milled in Fostoria, about 90 miles north of Columbus, for OYO.

For the honey- and vanilla-infused vodka that it has produced since December, the distiller uses wildflower honey from Lancaster. (The vanilla is obtained from Uganda, Konya said with a smile, because "We don't have good vanilla in Ohio.")

Watershed makes its vodka from corn but, as yet, limits its sourcing to the Midwest, not exclusively Ohio.

In creating the products and opening the businesses, both companies faced a learning curve.

Lehman joined a silent partner in 2007 to begin planning a distillery, but they needed time to acquire funding.

Without banks willing to underwrite them, they had to find private



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The soft red winter wheat used to make OYO vodka at Middle West Spirits



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Some of the products at Watershed Distillery



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Watershed Distillery co-owner Greg Lehman, cleaning the still at the distillery north of Grandview Heights



investors. Then, after leasing the space and purchasing a still in September, they had to fine-tune the recipes.

"We're by no means master distillers," Lehman said. "We learn every day. We've made every mistake you can make. There are variations in every batch."

Middle West has a similar story.

The owners presented their business plan to more than 20 banks before obtaining funding from Key Bank in Cleveland.

When they started producing the vodka with a custom-made Kothe copper still, they had an output of about 50 percent below industry standards -- so they hired a chemist for help.

"It took eight months to fine-tune the recipe," Konya said.

Early responses to the products of both companies have been positive.

The newly opened Hubbard Grille in the Short North features OYO vodka in its Hot & Filthy Martini, a \$10 drink splashed with olive juice and garnished with two jalapeno-stuffed olives.

"It's quite popular," general manager Daniel Morris said. "I'm a huge fan of their product and what they do. I think that product is, flat out, one of the best-tasting to come along in a long time."

Bill Glover, chef and owner of Sage American Bistro in the Ohio State University area, considers himself a big fan of Watershed and especially its gin.

"It's one of my favorite gins I've ever tasted," he said. "It's got an amazing flavor profile."

He uses it in a drink called Vespers, which includes Watershed gin and vodka along with Lillet Blanc and a splash of tonic.

With the distillers up and running, both are looking toward the future.

Watershed is aging bourbon for 2013.

Middle West has a whiskey to release in March and plans to make eau de vie and other liqueurs. (Because aging in barrels takes months to years, many micro-distillers first produce clear spirits -- which require no aging.)

Two distillers in a single city don't necessarily compete, according to the companies.

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Bottles of botanicals used by Watershed Distillery in its gin



If you go

- Middle West Spirits is at 1230 Courtland Ave. Open houses are offered at 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays and by appointment. OYO vodka is sold at the distillery and at various stores. For a list, call 614-299-2460 or visit www.middlewestspirits.c
- Watershed Distillery is at 1145 Chesapeake Ave., Suite D. Tastings are available by appointment only. For where to buy Watershed gin and vodka, call 614-357-1936 or visit www.watersheddistillery

Lehman appreciates the awareness that Middle West draws to the art of micro-distilling.

The real competition, Konya said, comes from the big distillers.

"There is plenty of room on the shelf for both of us."

robin.davis@dispatch.com

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