

FOOD DRINK SPIRITS

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MAKE IT A DOUBLE! North Shore Distillery's Gin No. 11 and Sirène Absinthe, as served in cocktails at The Violet Hour.

ABSINTHE MINDED *Illinois' only artisanal distillery makes a huge splash with its award-winning absinthe and gins*

Almost five years ago now, Derek and Sonja Kassebaum were on the verge of doing something that looked very, very foolhardy: leaving their jobs—he was a chemical engineer and business consultant, she was a lawyer and HR specialist—and opening Illinois' only artisanal distillery. They'd already gone deeply into debt to buy a handmade still and tanks. They couldn't even get a distilling permit until they'd purchased all of their equipment. And, as Sonja recalls, "I couldn't get a single distributor to return my calls." Any future for North Shore Distillery looked iffy.

A few thousand cocktails later, North Shore is now recognized as among the nation's best boutique distillers, specializing in gin and vodka. Its Distiller's Gin No. 6—an elegant, highly aromatic blend—has won plaudits from critics like the *New York Times's* Eric Asimov. In Chicago, North Shore's bottles are favorites of rock-star bartenders at The Violet Hour and The Drawing Room. And the Kassebaums, who run North Shore out of a small Lake Bluff warehouse, have done it all themselves—with the bottle-labeling help of a few grandmothers and stay-at-home moms.

Perhaps most remarkably, as of this summer, North Shore joins the very few American distillers to release an absinthe, the infamous Belle Époque liquor that's only recently become legal again. Once outlawed for its supposed toxicity—a reputation that's now blamed on its vertiginously high alcohol content and on shady manufacturers who used actual toxins—absinthe is flavored by the powerful trinity of anise, fennel and grand wormwood.

North Shore's Sirène absinthe, infused with additional secret herbs, is a longtime, much-beloved project. "We've been interested in absinthe for many years—before we had the distillery," says Kassebaum.

Look on the shelf for North Shore's No. 11 gin, too: Previously only available to restaurants, this drier, more traditional gin will hit stores this fall. In fact, the distillery's limited release this year is an Alphonso mango-infused version of No. 11. Recently allowed into the United States for the first time, Indian Alphonso mangoes are highly prized and nearly impossible to find. Last year, only several hundred cases made it to Chicago. "They're so juicy, with such an intense mango flavor," says Kassebaum. It's the sort of eclectic infusion that North Shore is making its specialty. Last year's limited release was the unlikely Rhuginger, an inspired rhubarb and ginger-infused version of No. 6. "Part of the fun of having a distillery is that you get to play with things," says Kassebaum. "What happens if I do that?"

North Shore's long-term ambitions are about more than infusing. "We want to make brandy and whiskey, but we're still in the experimental phase with those," says Kassebaum. And even if North Shore expands its portfolio, she says, it'll stay small. "Grey Goose makes in one day what it would take us six years to make. We do everything ourselves and by hand, and we like it that way. We're not trying to take over the world." ■

North Shore's spirits are available locally at Binny's and Sam's.