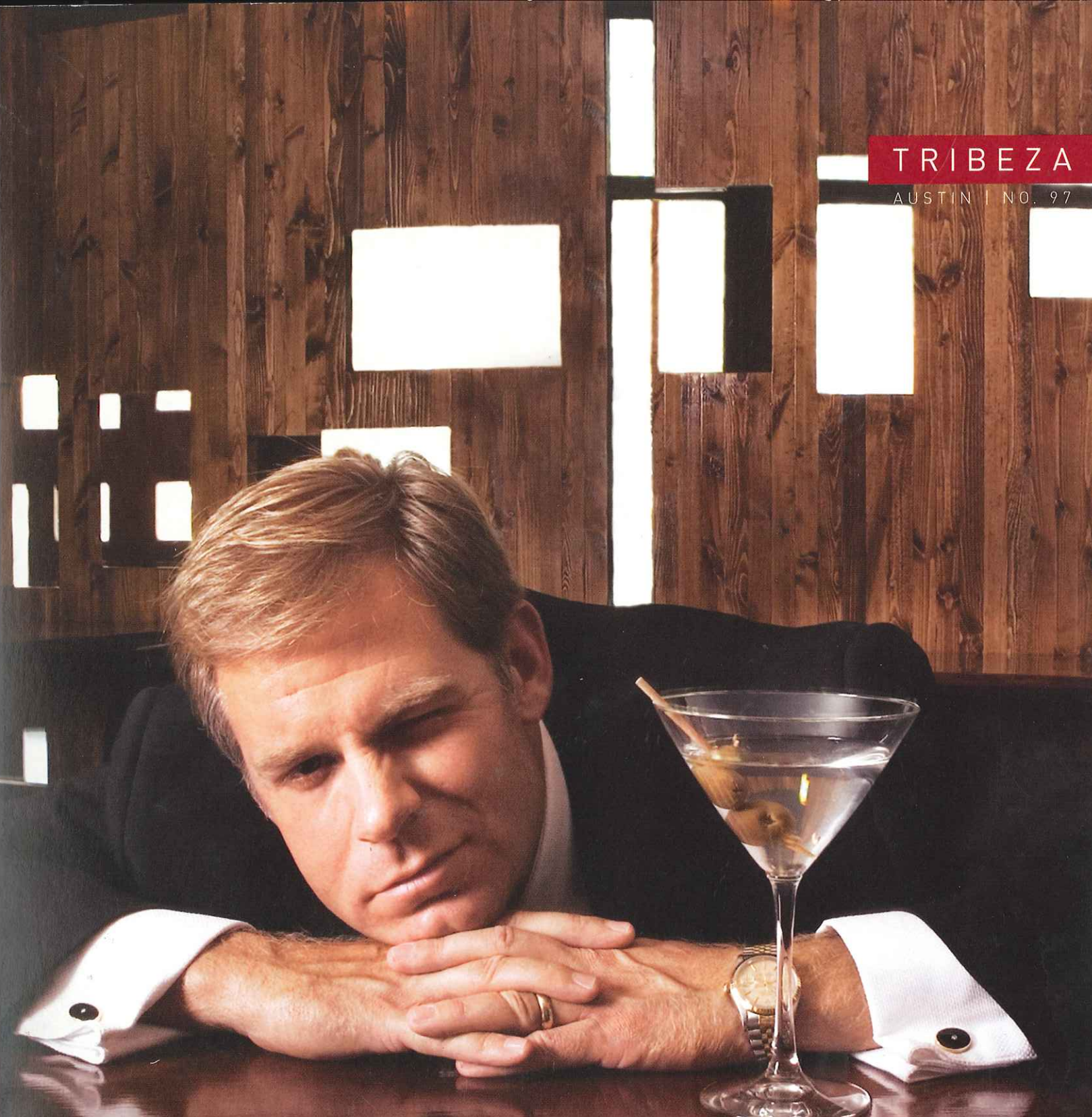


TRIBEZA

AUSTIN | NO. 97



Bottle Service

Let's toast to our growing supply of locally-made liquors and Hill Country wines.

By Jessica Dupuy

Photography by Jeff Stockton

Everyone knows that “Everything’s Bigger in Texas.” We’re big on ranches, big on trucks, big on steak, and certainly big on pride. And though the list of Texas “bigs” is longer than the Colorado River, the Lone Star State has recently become big on a few other things as well, namely wine and spirits. Just ask resident Austin wine expert, Ross Outon, of Twin Liquors.

“In the past few years, wineries have started marrying Texas microclimates with proper grapes such as Malbec, Sangiovese, and Tempranillo as opposed to trying to grow fighting varietals such as Cabernet and Chardonnay, which work much better in Napa Valley,” says Outon.

Outon sites Central Texas wineries like Fall Creek, Becker Vineyards, and Alamosa Wine Cellar for making great strides for Texas wine.

“Jim and Karen Johnson at Alamosa Wine Cellars are a perfect example of people who have helped pioneer a more avant garde winemaking style that pushes things a little bit outside the box,” says Outon.

Though Jim has been a self-proclaimed “gifted consumer” with a degree from the University of California at Davis, Karen came to love wine more accidentally, while courting Jim in the early 90’s.

“On our first date, Jim came over to pick me up and I had a bottle of Gallo in a jug with a screw top,” says Karen. “Jim just looked at me and said, ‘We’ve got a lot of work to do on you!’ Eventually it all started to click, but every time I learned something new about wine, there were ten more things to know.”

Today, she’s come a long way from when the couple planted their first grapes in 1996, and she has Jim to thank for it. While juggling her Austin-based State Farm agency, she also does crushes at Alamosa, spends her weekends at the vineyard providing tastings for guests, and she’s even working on her own sherry-style wine. Splitting her time between Austin and the vineyard has fulfilled a dream for both the Johnsons.

“We were really taken with how much the South of France looked like the Texas Hill Country,” says Karen. “Our whole vision was to select grapes that were perfect for the soil we had, rather than just plant what people had heard about in the California wine country.”

Today the varietals the Johnsons have planted such as Viognier, Mourvedre, Tempranillo, and Grenache have resulted in some of the state’s most respected blends, including the bold “El Guapo,” a Tempranillo blend recognized by its Texas Horned Toad label, and the Scissortail white blend featuring Marsanne, Rousanne, and a hint of Viognier.

The success of Central Texas wines has opened doors not only for more up-and-coming wineries, but for the world of spirits as well. Leading the pack is Tito Beveridge, who launched Tito’s Handmade Vodka in 1997, marking Tito’s as the first official distillery in Texas, and creating a smooth, reasonably-priced vodka that is great for both mixing and sipping on its own.

If you like your martinis up with a twist, Chad Auler’s Savvy vodka is a the perfect silky smooth ingredient.

“We were really taken with how much the South of France looked like the Texas Hill Country. Our whole vision was to select grapes that were perfect for the soil we had, rather than just plant what people had heard about in the California wine country.” — Karen Johnson

Beveridge’s tenacious move to distill a premium liquor in Texas opened the doors for other micro-distilleries to try their hand crafting liquors. To date, the Austin-area alone has welcomed Treaty Oak Rum, Dripping Springs Vodka, and Republic Tequila.

Austin cocktail guru and bar manager at FINO restaurant, Bill Norris, is an avid fan and supporter of local liquors. “It seems like everyday there’s another product coming out. It was Tito who really set the stage for that and with the international recognition he’s gotten, it has really helped other distillers try to do new things,” says Norris.

Chad Auler, who grew up learning to make wine at Fall Creek Vineyards from his parents Susan and Ed Auler, is one of those distillers. Blending a family tradition of wine making with an innate entrepreneurial verve, Auler launched Savvy, his own brand of premium vodka, in 2007.

“Even though I grew up around wine, vodka has always been my cocktail of choice,” says Auler, who confesses a martini straight up with a twist is his most common cocktail order. “But what I really set out to do when I launched Savvy was to make a world class vodka. I’ve always said that I’m not interested in being the biggest, I just want to try to be the best.”

With Savvy, he’s not far from achieving his goal. Starting with premium corn from South Texas and fresh water from the 100 percent spring-fed waters of Fall Creek on his family’s ranch, Auler’s spirit is crafted in a state-of-the-art column still made from a prominent Kentucky manufacturer—a departure from the more common pot still used by most vodka distillers.

Blazing the trail for the Texas wine industry, Karen Johnson of Alamosa Wine Cellars—led by her husband’s winemaking skills—proves that great wine can come from Texas.

Each batch of Savvy is distilled a minimum of 20 times, leaving no residual impurities in the final product. The result is a crisp, clean vodka with layered flavors and no burning aftertaste. You could mix this silky spirit in a cocktail, and many restaurants in Austin are doing just that, but Savvy is best experienced neat and slightly chilled. Savvy’s crystal clean process may appear manicured and simple, but the science involved is fairly complex.

Want to know how to turn rocket fuel into an 80 proof floral and honey-accented sipping whiskey? Give Chip Tate of Balcones Distillery a couple of hours and this veritable professor of spirits will not only show you how to do it, but he may let you taste the progression.

With more than 15 years of experience as a home beer brewer, a short span of time distilling Scotch in Scotland, and a diploma from the esteemed Institute of Brewing and Distilling in London, 34-year-old Tate is serious about making a premium Texas whiskey. He built his entire Waco-based distillery by hand throughout 2008 with the help of his production manager Jared Himstedt, and is marketing Balcones products together with his partner, Stephen Germer.

“I love what’s being produced in Texas right now,” says Tate. “It’s like the early 1980s was for craft beer. The Central Texas area has some great craft liquors that make a great alternative to mass-produced brands. We’re not alone in what we’re doing, but it’s fun to be at the beginning of it.”

In the upcoming months, the distillery will release four different spirits, including two Scotch-style single-malt whiskeys. Tasting similar to some rums, but having more characteristics of whiskey, the Balcones “Rumble” is made from an all-Texas mash of Sug-

arland turbinado sugar, Mission figs, and Livingston wildflower honey. Later in the year, the group will also release a light amber whiskey made from authentic roasted Hopi blue corn.

Austin will be the first place you can find Balcones Distillery products, something Bill Norris is looking forward to considering for his bar menu. "When I can, I like to use what's local," says Norris.

One of the key players in his cocktail mixes is locally-made orange and lemon liqueurs from Paula's Texas Spirits. "When we're looking at a recipe that has an orange or lemon component, Paula's is always our first choice," says Norris. "They've got a really pure fruit flavor that works well with other ingredients."

And Norris isn't Paula's only fan. You can find Paula's Texas Orange and Paula's Texas Lemon on the menu at Annie's, Moonshine, the Cedar Door. With a background in the tech industry, Paula Angerstein never would have dreamed she'd be concocting one of the best secrets to a killer margarita, or a smooth, reasonably priced limoncello. But as she began to tire of her technology career path, she was reminded of her many travels to Italy where she'd find herself sipping limoncello with her husband and local restaurateurs long into the evening.

"Limoncello is more than just a thing to drink in Italy," says Angerstein. "It's a piece of culture that people share. I wanted to bring that experience back home."

She developed her first limoncello batch based on a recipe in *Savour* magazine. But when she consulted her friend Russell Smith at Twin Liquors about it, he suggested she venture into making an orange-flavored liqueur for margaritas that could compete against Cointreau and Grand Marnier, but at a slightly lower price.

And so, after a few years of working on permits and production, in February 2005, Paula's Texas Orange was born, followed by Paula's Texas Lemon in October 2006.

"Now that we're going into our fifth year, I never would have thought we could maintain this growth," says Angerstein. "But we love the Texas market and we look forward to growing within the state before we even thinking about selling nationwide."

Angerstein's level-headed approach to growing her business is in keeping with most of the other wine and spirits producers in Central Texas. It seems the key is patience and having integrity with your product. "It's a dance in Texas," says Outon. "It's all a balancing act and Texas winemakers and distillers are proving that they can do it." ■