

Ladies Make Hooch in Ivy City

Spirits are high in Ivy City. At last count, this rapidly growing area of Washington, DC boasts no fewer than three distilleries and one brewery. Among the stills are Republic Restoratives, at 1369 New York Ave., NE, across from the Hecht Company Warehouse.

What sets this 15-month-old enterprise apart from the others is that it's owned and operated by women: Pia Carusone and Rachel Gardner. Moreover, Republic Restoratives is the largest "crowd-funded" distillery in the nation. Fundraising on line, the pair raised \$120,000 in three days by contacting family, friends, and colleagues. Providing a valuable launch pad was Indiegogo, an international crowd funding website founded in 2008 by Danae Ringelmann, Slava Rubin, and Eric Schell. Headquartered in San Francisco, Indiegogo enables people to solicit funds for an idea, charity, or start-up business. Indiegogo charges a five percent fee



on contributions. Fifteen million people visit the site each month.

What's in a name?

"We're located in Washington DC, and we wanted to honor the republic," Gardner explained as she

guided me around the two-story, 24,000-square-foot facility. "And 'Restoratives' was a code name for whiskey during Prohibition." The District, she added, has the nation's most progressive laws governing craft distilleries.

Republic Restoratives markets its products to dozens of area bars and restaurants. Gardner estimates that 50 percent of its revenue comes from those sales, the other half from its popular tasting room. There, bartenders Kevin Baptiste and Doug Fisher create a variety of cocktails using RR spirits, with mixes made with fruits and other fresh ingredients. The drink menu changes every weekend. Beverage Director David Strauss designs the drinks and trains staff. RR employs a half dozen people full-time, about seven part-time. Gardner herself does not tend bar. "I make the hooch, I don't shake the hooch," she quipped. Fisher poured me a Moscow Mule, a refreshing concoction of vodka, lime juice, club soda, and candied ginger.

How did Republic Restoratives come about?

Carusone and Gardner are longtime friends who grew up together in upstate New York. Rachel earned her bachelor's degree in environmental policy at Mills College in Oakland and her MBA at Presidio in San Francisco. She also lived in Seattle, where she visited distilleries. Capping off her "boozy" education was a week-long stint

at Moonshine University in Louisville, Ky. Handling the business end of the enterprise is Pia, who graduated from Bard College in Rhinebeck, New York.

Greeting RR visitors is canine Zuni (named after San Francisco's Zuni Café) and a vintage phone booth, which the women salvaged from a long-ago building tenant. For now, the distillery is making bourbon, rye, and vodka. This fall, look for apple brandy, squeezed with fruit grown in Adams County, Pennsylvania orchards. I took a sniff of the brandy, which was aging in a French oak barrel. Potent!

The most popular RR spirit?

Vodka in summer, rye in winter, Gardner said. Coming next summer: gin. By the way, clear liquors like vodka — made with local sweet corn and filtered numerous times through charcoal — never touch the inside of a barrel. Bourbon, on the other hand, must be aged in a new white oak barrel. Bourbon's legal requirements are strict. Besides the barrel aging, bourbon must be American-made, containing at least 51 percent corn, and no additives besides water. Bourbon must be distilled at no more than 160 proof (80 percent) alcohol.

RR's products are made at different times. During my visit, they were working on bourbon. Rachel showed us her 1,000-gallon "mash ton," in which corn is combined with water and cooked five or six hours at 90 degrees F to make starch, which turns into sugar.



Republic Restoratives bartender Kevin Baptiste shakes a mean cocktail

Then yeast, a "fickle beast," is added to make alcohol.

Why bourbon?

"We're watching trends in this country move towards younger bourbon drinkers and women, people who have maybe been a little timid about bourbon," Carusone stated on RR's website. "We're interested in a product that is approachable, something that's not too hot or spicy on the tongue."

For now, Republic Restoratives sells three kinds of liquor, also available at the distillery: Civic vodka (\$29); Borough bourbon (\$79); Rodham rye, also \$79. (The rye is named after Hillary Clinton, who dwells in New York.)

Republic Restoratives is open to the public Thursday and Friday from 5 to 11 p.m., Saturday noon to 11 p.m., Sundays noon to 5 p.m. RR also conducts Saturday and Sunday distillery tours. For more information, call 202-733-3996 or visit www.republicrestoratives.com. For assistance on starting a distillery or other business, contact www.indiegogo.com.

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Article photos: Celeste McCall

Republic Restoratives co-owner Rachel Gardner places a "call" in a vintage phone booth, left by a long-gone building tenant