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From Cantoring to Cocktails

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Image: Courtesy of New York Distilling Company

Allen Katz, co-founder of New York Distilling Company.

Not long into my interview with Allen Katz, co-founder (with Tom Potter) of New York Distilling Company, I decided I wanted to meet his parents. More specifically, I wanted to go back in time and be invited over to Katz's childhood Baltimore home for Friday night dinner, to meet his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and any other extended family member who would have attended.

It's not that I have a lousy family — I have great parents and all the rest of it — but there is something about the generations of entrepreneurs from which Katz is descended that captured my imagination.

While showing me around the distillery and bar, The Shanty (you can view the distillery through the Shanty's window), Katz told me a bit about his family's story, and then about his own. Turns out, being an entrepreneur may be genetic.



Image: Courtesy of New York Distilling Company

The Shanty bar at New York Distilling Company.

When Katz was a child, he said, his parents were small-business owners. “They created their own small business,” he said. “They tuned cars. In the mid 70s they looked around and said, ‘Hey what are the opportunities to make a living? The economy is down, oil prices are up; people are going to need to take care of their cars.’”

The short version of their story, according to Katz, is that they went to the library, read the books and figured out how cars work and how to fix them, and then started a business. “Their role models would have been their family members,” he continued. “My great grandfather had what they would have called at the time a department store, in West Virginia. My mother’s family had some builders and my grandfather and a great-uncle had a roof truss company. They had ups and down but they worked for themselves.”

Although it was never said aloud when he was growing up, Katz said he feels like they held the belief that people who were happiest as adults, with the most fulfilling lives, were the ones who worked for themselves. Working for themselves meant they could always leave work and be home for dinner — if not every night of the week, most certainly for Friday night dinners with the extended family.

Even knowing this, Katz didn’t plan on going into business for himself. During a personal investigation of self, he said, he went to a Jewish Theological Seminary with the idea of possibly become a cantor. He was told that his “Hebrew wasn’t suitable,” he said — and that was almost

that. For a short while, he did become what he termed a “rent-a-cantor.” He would wait tables until 2 a.m. then take the train to Westchester to cantor at services. But “I couldn’t keep my head up,” he said. Exhaustion got the better of him, and his part-time cantoring came to an end.

What Katz discovered while working at restaurants was that he really enjoyed interacting with so many people; in particular, “the characters you meet from all over the world. The cultural jambalaya of people. The cultural interaction.”

After half dozen years in the service industry, Allen finally heeded the urging of a friend who insisted that he *had* to see Europe. Katz wasn’t looking for anything in particular, but before he left home his father whispered to him, “You never know, you may find something over there. Don’t be afraid to take it.”

What was supposed to be a six-week journey turned into two years in Tuscany, where Katz worked at a cooking school and discovered the Slow Food movement. Upon his return to New York, he spent time working with Slow Food and started to think about the cultural heritage of what we consume. He also began to think about authentic American gastronomy, asking himself if there even was such a thing. He determined that there were two great forms of American cuisine: barbecue of the American South and cocktails.

Cut to many years and many ideas later, and Katz’s NY Distilling Company specializes in old-fashioned American spirits specifically made for cocktails. Currently, there are five labels produced by NYDC, each with its own story.







Image: Courtesy of New York Distilling Company

Three of the products are gins: Dorothy Parker American Gin, Perry’s Tot Navy Strength and Chief Gowanus New Netherland Gin. Two are ryes: Aged for almost seven years, Ragtime Rye is an American Straight Whisky; the final offering is Mister Katz’s Rock & Rye.

A bar staple in the late 19th and early 20th century, “rock ’n rye” was a young rye (and maybe a little harsh) that was served with rock candy or rock candy syrup to smooth out its rough edges. Per the NYDC website, “In service to the past and present, Mister Katz’s Rock & Rye marries our youthful rye whiskey and rock candy sugar with sour cherries, cinnamon and a wisp of citrus.”

(I highly suggest you head to the [NYDC website](#) to read more of the stories. If nothing else, I guarantee you’ll learn something you didn’t know about American history.)

Cocktails are an American creation, worthy of the same respect and appreciation heaped on food and wine (and now, finally, beer). The martini, the sidecar, the mint julep — these and so many other cocktails are part of our literary, film and social histories. Cocktails are an American tradition to be proud of, because they marry the old to the new, seamlessly.

Allen Katz and his partners are not just making liquor; they’re preserving history while giving it a present-day context. There’s nothing wrong with a gin and tonic — heck, it’s my summer staple — but the discovery of a new cocktail, one that uses ingredients native to our still-unfolding

American story, one that is complex, exciting and demands to be savored, has a place of pride in our landscape, in our kitchens and in our glasses.

The Big Iron

Being a diligent reporter, I had to go out and get the Mister Katz's Rock & Rye, so I could taste it and make one of Katz's cocktails.

2 ounces Mister Katz's Rock & Rye

1 dash Angostura Bitters

1 dash Orange Bitters

1) Combine ingredients in an old-fashioned glass. Stir over a large ice cube.

This was lovely and simple. I would categorize it as a member of the Manhattan family, but with a little bit more sweetness. I asked Katz for a second drink recipe, one to serve before a winter dinner. I bet this would also be spectacular for dessert, over vanilla ice cream with a bit of warm homemade applesauce.

King of Kings Manhattan

Punt e Mes is a bitter Italian vermouth. You can substitute a 2:1 mix of sweet vermouth and Campari.

2 ounces Ragtime Rye whiskey

½ ounce Punt e Mes*

½ ounce Martini & Rossi Sweet Vermouth

2 dashes Angostura Bitters

1) Stir ingredients over ice until exceedingly well-chilled. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with a brandied cherry on a cocktail pick.

Naomi Major is a writer living in the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan. You can find more of her writing at www.NaomiMajor.com

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