



Steve Strong ('92) started his Kansas City business in 2012.

That's the Spirit

Steve Strong continues building his distilling business from the underground up

BY CHUCK GREEN ('93)

AS FAR AS “MAN CAVES” GO, STEVE STRONG HAS some definite bragging rights. It is spacious, with 12-foot ceilings, and friends stop by all the time. And there is plenty of liquor.

However, it is an actual cave, and it houses the business he and his wife, Lisa, founded in 2012: S.D. Strong Distilling.

The distillery is housed in a commercial

cavern 65 feet below Parkville, Mo., an old river town on the northwest corner of Kansas City. As far as Strong knows, it is the world's only caved-based distillery.

“The only legal one, anyway,” he said.

The man-made cave was created by limestone mining in the 1970s. Hundreds of natural pillars, created when the surrounding limestone was dug

COURTESY S.D. STRONG DISTILLING (2)

out, support the space. The pillars also serve as navigational tools, each numbered as a sort of underground address for the two-dozen businesses and entities using the space.

S.D. Strong Distilling can be found at Pillar 136.

It consists of three areas: a bar, a tasting room and the main distillery/barrel room. The business hosts private parties and concerts, particularly for emerging area artists, and there are even weekend tours available.

But the lifeblood flows from the production area. Although the distillery is relatively new, it already is carving out its place as crowd pleaser in the spirits and liquor industry.

After earning his bachelor of journalism in 1992, Strong moved to the Kansas City area. For the next 20 years, he sold high-end acoustic guitars and fed his longtime passion for playing live music.

But it was a bandmate's hobby that finally changed his life.

“He and his cousin were making moonshine in a garage,” Strong said. “It wasn't bad, and I decided I wanted to try making it.”

Strong promptly built a still and began tinkering with liquor recipes. Missouri's laws allowed him to make as much as 100 gallons for “personal consumption.”

After some positive feedback from friends, he decided he wanted to take his hobby to the next level. But Strong quickly learned that starting a distillery is a risky endeavor, since the process requires actually building the operation before applying for production licenses.

“You have no idea whether you'll get the go-ahead,” he said. “But once I got going, it became easier.”

About nine months after the first bottle of the inaugural S.D. Strong Vodka was sold in 2013, Strong released Pillar 136 Gin. Named after the aforementioned supporting pillar, the spirit differs from common London-style dry gin with a more “citrus-forward style,” he said, ensured through his hand-selection of lemons, limes, oranges and fresh ginger.

“I figured I'll drink it for a long time, so I had to like it,” he said. “I just hoped everyone else would, too.”

So far, so good.

In 2015, Pillar 136 was entered in the Washington

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S.D. Strong's spirits are sold at retailers, bars and restaurants in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Texas and, yes, even Nebraska. Plans are in the works to sell in Colorado this fall.

Cup Spirits Competition, an exclusive contest for American-made spirits and liqueurs. Judged by the country's top spirits professionals, the best in each class is determined, and six are picked overall as the competition's outstanding spirits.

Pillar 136 repeated its Washington Cup win in 2016, and earned a bronze medal at the San Francisco World Spirits competition.

Some of Strong's other creations have had similar success. His signature vodka has won silver medals at the past three Washington Cups.

His growing list of spirits are on sale at retailers, bars and restaurants throughout Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Texas. Colorado is on tap to be added this fall.

As Strong concentrates on perfecting his spirits, Lisa is the company's marketing director and brand manager. They employ about a dozen others, all striving to expand the distillery's reach into more states.

All from the underground up.