

STARTING AT SQUARE

A Northern California-based entrepreneur takes vodka to the next level.

By Nancy Davidson

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ocated north of San Francisco, the city of Novato is home to such progressive “feel good” entrepreneurial businesses as Republic of Tea, Birkenstock and Juice Beauty in nearby San Rafael. So when Allison Evanow prepared to launch the world’s first 100% certified organic American rye vodka business, she, too, turned to Northern California’s Marin County.

In some ways, Square One Vodka could be based anywhere. Unlike much of corporate America, Evanow’s company does not work out of an office building. Rather, she and her employees work mostly out of their homes. Evanow’s business philosophy not only reflects her dedication to maintaining a fine balance between

work and life, but also the lifestyle of where she lives and works. Many of Marin County’s citizens are dedicated to the “eco-chic” way of life, where being “green” doesn’t always equal sacrifice.

Starting her own business was not something Evanow planned. In fact, the decision came when her job transferred her to New York—and she had no intention of uprooting her family, which included then-six-month-old twins. She didn’t want to sacrifice her balanced life, but she also wanted to continue working in the distilled spirits business. So Evanow did something most people only dream about: She started her own company. The idea came to her in August of 2004, and after two years of hard work, Square One launched in April of 2006. >

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Margie Goolan handles marketing, sales and operations for Square One. She originally met Evanow while working at winery Domaine Chandon. While Goolan valued the experience, she grew tired of her hour-long commute. "I have two boys, now teenagers," she says. "It's a challenge to try and keep your career going and at the same time keep your eye on what's going on at home." Like Evanow, Goolan embraces the balance between work and home, and doesn't miss working in an office.

Evanow acknowledges that a bigger company might not thrive under such flexible conditions. But for Square One, inefficiency has not been an issue. "So far there's only a few of us, and productivity hasn't been a problem," she says.

Goolan credits the success of the arrangement in part to Evanow's business style: "She communicates well, sets deadlines, you know where you are, and there's a sense of accountability," she says.

There's no denying that vodka isn't typically included on an everyday organic shopping list. It's not a nutritional necessity, and consumers aren't likely to be harmed by any pesticides used on the raw materials that make vodka, since the product is distilled and, therefore, purified.

Evanow admits organic vodka is not a priority compared to foods—especially fruits—that are treated with pesticides organic consumers want to avoid. But this fact makes her choice even more reflective of her philosophy of conscious living, a philosophy that takes everyone—not just the end user—into consideration.

"If you can make vodka in a way that keeps farmers from having to be exposed to pesticides or herbicides, isn't that preferable?" she asks. Evanow also discovered that the organic process positively affected the flavor.

Evanow chose to make the alcohol from rye for historical reasons, over the more common potato or wheat. Rye was one of the original grains used to produce vodka, and she also believed that connoisseurs, knowing that rye is more difficult to work with, would place a higher value on the end result. Square One would not only be high quality, but also unique.

On the down side, rye is more costly than wheat or potato because it's harder to work with; there's an extra step in the fermentation process since a catalyst must be used to jump start the conversion from starch to sugar. To do it organically, Evanow



Square One CEO Allison Evanow

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says, they gave up about 50% of the yield.

Once Evanow made her decision to produce organic rye vodka, she turned to Gray Ottley of Distilled Resources (www.waytogoIdaho.com), an Idaho-based distillery that founded the organic beverage alcohol business in the US in September 2000.

At first, Ottley tried to convince Evanow to use the organic potato-based spirit; however, he soon realized that she was set on making it with rye. Ottley is always open to partner with someone who he believes can succeed. “She had industry experience, she was utterly and completely focused on organic, and she had great ideas,” he says.

But the number one goal of any company is to please the consumer, and Square One is taking off around the country. Greg Best, a mixologist at Atlanta’s Restaurant Eugene (www.restaurantEugene.com), was attracted to Square One because the product was in tune with the restaurant’s interest in “sustainability, boutique products and the little guy.” He requested a sample—and he loved it. “It’s unique, tastes good and has great packaging,” he says.

Best became acquainted with Evanow when Restaurant Eugene was planning a dinner featuring organic products from local Georgia-based farmers. She traveled to Atlanta and together they created special cocktails using homemade fruit syrups mixed with Square One to accompany dinner. This inspired Best to develop a line of flower-flavored syrups that can be mixed into vodka-based cocktails. And in a bar that creates its tonic water from scratch, using vodka like Square One just makes sense.

Square One’s staff, vendors and customers all seem to believe in similar ideals. In Goolan’s words, “What makes me feel good is working for a company that isn’t conforming to traditional corporate molds with hidden agendas. We don’t want people to have to settle.” ✈