



BREWING UP BUSINESS: Cathy Siskind-Kelly and husband Rob Kelly plan to open Ontario's first micro-distillery at Dundas and Talbot streets in downtown London. The Black Fly Beverage Co. plans to start cranking out vodka coolers within three weeks.

SUSAN BRADNAM The London Free Press

Blackfly to make coolers

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WHAT'S IN A NAME

The Black Fly Beverage Co. is about to bust down a barrier and establish Ontario's first microdistillery in downtown London.

Cathy Siskind-Kelly and her husband Rob Kelly expect to be cranking out vodka coolers within three weeks in their funky new mini-factory at the corner of Dundas and Talbot streets.

Their blueberry-cranberry cooler will then be shipped out to bars and liquor stores in the area.

"It's exciting to pioneer a new industry in Ontario," says Cathy, who said similar businesses already operate in Alberta and British Columbia.

Although microbreweries and small craft wineries have been operating in Ontario for years, the production and distribution of liquor-based products have remained in the tight grip of big distilleries and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario.

It all started when Rob, who used to run a landscape business, got the idea to start a micro-distillery to cash in on the hot market for coolers and pre-mixed drinks, which are rapidly displacing liquor and beer as favourites among younger drinkers.

The couple then plunged into two years of letter-writ-

ing and lobbying to persuade the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario and the LCBO to give them the licences they needed.

But at another level, he says the name speaks to the ambitions of a tiny business that wants to take a bite out of the industry giants.

"You can't see them but they can take a chunk out of you. They're a force to be reckoned with."

"It was a long and protracted process," said Cathy, who formerly ran a property development business. "We heard 'no' many times along the way. Our position was always, 'Let us know how we can alter our business plan to get a licence.'"

They are still fighting for a licence to sell their coolers from a retail counter at a front entrance to their business. For the time being, they are limited to product samples.

"Every other producer in the province has the right to a retail counter. We want the same right," says Rob.

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BLACK FLY: Store acts as a massive billboard

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Although they say it may have been more practical to set up in an industrial area or strip mall, Cathy says a prominent downtown location was a big part of their marketing plan.

"We're at the heart of what's happening in the city. This is a brand that Londoners can identify as theirs."

The store itself will act as a massive billboard. Passersby will be able to watch the bottling process through the windows. At night, the upper

MAKING BLACK FLY VODKA COOLER

► Vodka spirits and a concentrate of wild blueberries and cranberries, both purchased from suppliers, are mixed in a large tanks with distilled water and flavourings.

► Carbonation is added to the mix which is cooled to -3 C to prevent foaming and moved to a bottling assembly line where pre-rinsed plastic bottles are filled, capped and labelled.

windows facing the John Labatt Centre will be turned into giant video screens featuring local entertainers, animation and sports videos.

Kathy says local bars and restaurants seem ready to sell their cooler.

"We have had tremendous support pledged considering we don't have a product for them to taste yet."

She says city officials have also supported them by providing the necessary rezoning and a loading zone.