



John Bernasconi, left, is one of the founders of KGB Spirits, a distiller of whiskey, vodka, gin, liqueur and absinthe located in Alcalde, NM, north of Española. KGB is part of a national trend hand-crafted, high-quality spirits. PHOTOS BY WES NAMAN

## Signature spirits

KGB Spirits hand-crafts a line of New Mexican whiskeys, vodka, gin and liqueurs at distillery in Alcalde, north of Española

BY JUSTIN GOODRUM

Within the past 10 years, breweries in New Mexico captured the imagination of beer enthusiasts. Distilled spirits, meanwhile, have gone somewhat under the radar. But that's starting to change. Just 45 minutes north of Española, in Alcalde, KGB Spirits is quickly earning a reputation for creating tasty New Mexican spirits.

Founded in 2009 by John Bernasconi, Karen Lubliner and George Schurman, KGB Spirits utilizes state-specific ingredients to craft one-of-a-kind rums, whiskeys and gins. The KGB product line includes Taos Lightning Rye and Bourbon Whiskey, Los Luceros Hacienda Gin, Vodka Viracocha, Naranjo Orange Liqueur and Brimstone Absinthe. But getting production up and running was no cakewalk. In the early stages of planning, Bernasconi had much red tape to deal with.

"It's a lot of bureaucracy, without question," he explained in a recent interview with *Local iQ*. "You have to go through county commissioners, neighborhood associations, state licensing, as well as federal licensing. It took at least a year to do all of that."

After jumping through all those hoops, Bernasconi heard that the Los Luceros Winery was up for sale. It was the perfect place to form his distillery. "It was owned by a Los Alamos scientist, who was looking to retire and move on. It was perfect. He actually had a lot of equipment that I was able to use," Bernasconi said. One of the main goals of KGB is to make sure every product is authentic and of high quality. When a spirit is first created, elements such as fresh water, temperature and time of day contribute a natural favor to every drink. Each batch is hand-crafted and labeled with a badge number, because each bottle has its own unique characteristics. Bernasconi knew the limestone properties of the Alcalde water were key to creating a distinct flavor.

### SANTA FE

#### KGB Spirits

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Kelly's Liquors,  
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[kgbspirits.com](http://kgbspirits.com)

"We have a water source here in Alcalde which has lots of minerals in it, a lot of limestone, which is very similar to what you find in Kentucky. So it was ideal," Bernasconi said.

In terms of promotion, Bernasconi sought out the services of renowned beverage consultant and mixologist Natalie Bovis. Bovis was attracted to KGB because of the hand-crafted quality of the company's products. "Each batch might be slightly different especially in the beginning stages, and I find that really cool," Bovis said.

Growing up in Santa Fe and then living in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, Bovis returned home to bring a big city sensibility to KGB. Appearing on local TV shows like KASA Fox 2's *New Mexico Style* and other media outlets has been invaluable for KGB's exposure.

Bernasconi's passion is evident throughout the distillery, which houses an imported copper still and an "alembic" still from Germany. It has resulted in KGB Spirits winning multiple awards at the 2012 San Francisco World Spirits Competition for its Vodka Viracocha, Taos Lightning Rye Whiskey, Taos Lightning Bourbon Whiskey and Hacienda Gin.

Since each spirit has its own specific narrative, it's Bovis' job to educate restaurants and bars on how to present the brand. Bovis teaches managers, servers and bartenders on her signature cocktails to guarantee guests keep coming back for more every time they visit. She claims all parties benefit when the products are correctly implemented.

"The guest is happy because their getting a great drink, the bar is happy because their selling product, the server is happy because their making tips. It's a win-win for everybody," Bovis said.