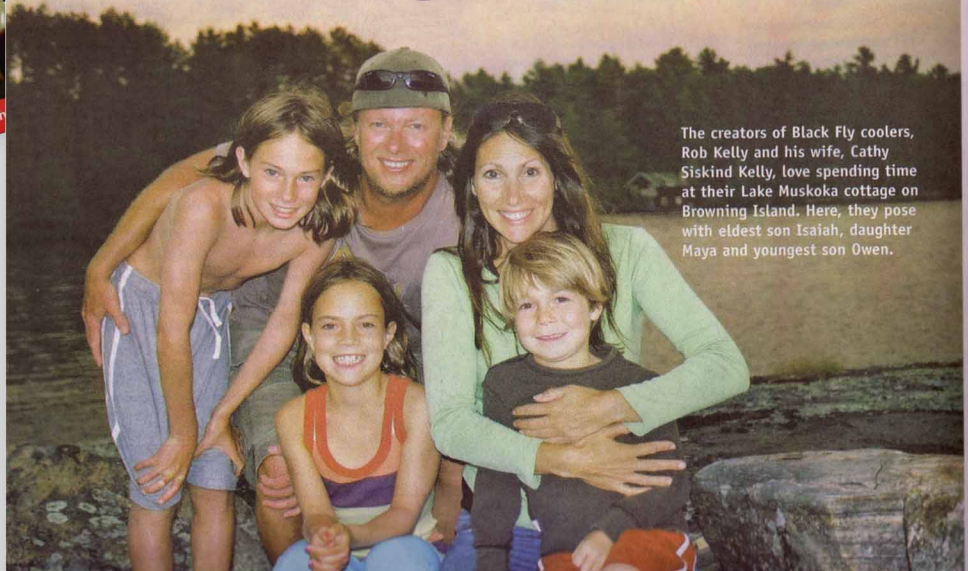




Taking a bite out of the beverage industry



The creators of Black Fly coolers, Rob Kelly and his wife, Cathy Siskind Kelly, love spending time at their Lake Muskoka cottage on Browning Island. Here, they pose with eldest son Isaiah, daughter Maya and youngest son Owen.

Article by Brienne Juniper

Cottaging is in the blood of Rob Kelly and his wife Cathy Siskind Kelly, which is why when they started one of Ontario's first micro-distilleries in almost a century, they called their unique blend of berries and vodka Black Fly Beverages.

When developing the flavours, Rob drew upon years of berry picking on Lake Muskoka's Browning Island, where he spent his summers at the family cottage. He also incorporated elements in the packaging of the drink that made the brand cottage friendly.

Despite the widespread popularity of the coolers thus far, it began like most other small business ventures. Looking to embark on a new career path a few years ago, the couple took an interest in small-scale brewing in their hometown of London, Ont.

"We were looking for a new challenge," says Rob, explaining how it began.

He and Cathy initially began researching the beer market. Because they didn't have any background in the industry, they employed the wisdom of consultants.

"We started studying the alcohol market and found that vodka coolers and spirits were in a heavy growth phase," Rob continues. "We thought that was a good business opportunity, so instead of brewing, we went to the distilling side."

From there, they were off and running. Well sort of, he explains, as it took over

18 months for the couple to navigate the waters of setting up a micro-distillery and securing a license. Yet despite the shift in focus from beer to coolers, Cathy says most of the plan stayed true to the original idea – producing a great tasting Canadian product.

By May of 2005, their product hit the shelves of six London-area LCBO stores, and they grew exponentially from there.

"By the end of the first summer, we were in about 150 stores, and we are now in over 510 stores and we have three different products," says Cathy, listing off the variety of coolers that come in flavours such as cranberry, wild blueberry and black currant – fruits that are almost synonymous with summer in Muskoka.

"Muskoka was an inspiration for all aspects of our drinks, from the flavour components of cranberry and wild blueberry, specifically local fruits and indigenous berries," explains Rob. "Even our packaging . . . the name – everything was inspired by northern Ontario."

Part of the beauty of Black Fly is the packaging. It seems the Rob and Cathy thought of everything when considering convenience, storage and even cleanup.

The plastic 400 ml bottles Black Fly comes in are re-sealable, recyclable and easy to transport, explains Cathy, who's had more than enough experience trucking empties from their island abode to the marina. Even the labels are made with plas-

tic so they don't peel and bleed once they become damp.

And at the pair's cottage, as with many in the region, a house rule is no glass on the dock or rocks, making Black Fly a simple choice.

What sets Black Fly apart from the other standard coolers found at the LCBO, besides their local appeal, is the low sugar content. Rob and Cathy made sure Black Fly was made with real juices, with no artificial colours, flavours or dyes.

"A lot of readers will relate to the sugar scale in choosing wines," explains Cathy. "Traditional coolers are usually rated between nine and 18 on the LCBO sugar scale, whereas our Cranberry Blueberry is a four and the Black Currant Blueberry is a five."

"They're much cleaner too," Rob adds. "We harp on the fact that we use much more natural ingredients – natural high quality premium cranberry juice and wild blueberry juice. It's much cleaner and easier on the body."

This year, Rob and Cathy came up with a new idea to market to the LCBO – coolers in frozen form which they marketed under the catchy name of Spiked Ice. The variety packs of vodka freezies flew off the shelves this summer and were widely enjoyed by cottagers on the dock or the deck; the only concern being how to keep them out of the hands of youngsters.

Black Fly Beverages has already caught on throughout Ontario, and has begun spreading to the East Coast. Rob says in the future they plan to expand to the United States, but only after securing locations all across Canada – as fulfilling the local market is their ultimate goal.

Many find it curious that they decided upon a name like Black Fly for their budding company in 2005, considering the widespread dislike of the pesky insects. But for Rob, it was a name that not only alluded to his days of cottaging in Muskoka, but also the drink's punch.

"They're small insects, but they deliver a mighty bite," he says.

And as all Muskokans know, they sure do. 