



Thirst for Black Fly grows

By Krista Habermehl, MA'05

If you're not much of a beer drinker, chances are, you've heard the buzz about Black Fly Beverage Company – a unique Canadian micro-distillery that bottles premium vodka-based drinks with real berry juices.

Founded in 2005 by Rob Kelly, BA'86, and his wife Cathy Siskind-Kelly, the "proudly Canadian" London cooler company has experienced rapid growth in the few short years since launching its distinctive product.

"I call it a brewery gone right," said Kelly, who originally planned to establish a micro-brewery, when he learned the beer industry was actually experiencing market erosion due to an upsurge in cooler consumption.

"I met with an Ivey MBA graduate who had beer industry experience and another colleague for advice, and they mentioned that coolers were in a growth stage. I thought to myself 'why wouldn't I get into coolers then?'"

Six months later, the couple was in possession of a unique license that allowed them to set up the micro-



Cathy Siskind-Kelly and Rob Kelly at Black Fly Beverage's new facility. Photo by Jackie Nobel

distillery – the first of its kind in Ontario. They initially settled into a highly-visible location in downtown London, but have recently moved into a much bigger facility to accommodate increasing demand for their product.

Originally sold in six London LCBO stores, the company now sells Black Fly coolers in more than 500 LCBO stores and experienced 140-percent growth last year in the Ontario market alone. Black Fly has since broken into markets in Nova Scotia, B.C. and Alberta and has seen some interest from the Yukon. When the time is right, the couple says they would like to take the company national and beyond.

"We've been cautious about not taking on too much too soon," said Siskind-Kelly. "We wanted to be confident that we could serve each market well."

According to Siskind-Kelly, in the highly-competitive field of alcoholic beverages, only the top performing brands – the top 80 per cent – stay on the shelves. "It's a competitive and

challenging industry – we have to perform as well as the big guys," said Siskind-Kelly.

Despite the challenges, the couple says they've received a great amount of support from the local community and even large breweries, who view their coolers as a complementary product rather than competition. "We feel very fortunate to have launched our company in London," said Siskind-Kelly. "Black Fly is a hometown brand and we've developed a really nice relationship with the city and the university."

"We both feel closely tied to London and Western," added Kelly, who, as a student living in Saugeen-Maitland residence, cultivated his entrepreneurial spirit by launching a fast-food delivery business called Dial-A-Burger. The business was wildly popular and eventually grew too big for Kelly to manage while being a full-time student. Despite having to step back from the business, he said the experience has stayed with him.

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Also, the couple says being close to Siskind-Kelly's father, local businessman and former chair of Western's Board of Governors, Bob Siskind, BA'88, LLD'89, has proved invaluable.

"We learned a lot about starting a small business from Dad and have come to rely on him greatly as a business advisor," said Siskind-Kelly. The best

piece of advice he's given them, she said, is to be comfortable in relinquishing some of the control as the business grows. "We've hired a great group of people that we trust and we have a ton of fun at work," she said.



Black Fly sells two flavours of coolers – cranberry and wild berry, and black currant and wild blueberry – and will be adding a third flavour, strawberry and rhubarb, in the near future. Also available is Spiked Ice, a frozen cooler product.

For more information, visit www.blackflycoolers.com