



# Selling Vodka

**NAME:** Tito Beveridge **AGE:** 47 **HOME:** Austin

**QUALIFICATIONS:** Founder and owner of Tito's Handmade Vodka, the first legal distillery in Texas, which sells more than 230,000 cases a year in the United States and Canada

● Yes, Beveridge is my real name: Bert Butler Beveridge II. I'm named after my granddad. As my wife likes to say, "Nomenclature is destiny."

● I was one of those kids who liked jacking around with stuff. So I got a beer kit and started making beer when I was a teenager and all through college. But I always wanted to build a still and start distilling.

● I was watching a show on PBS, and this guy drew a line down the middle of a sheet of paper and said, "If you're trying to figure out your life, put what you're good at on the left side and what you love to do on the right side." So I did. On the left side I had "I'm good with numbers," "I'm good at selling." On the right side was "I like meeting people," "I like to party," "I like going to bars and nice restaurants," "I don't like being at a desk." I was sitting there looking at the list, and I thought, "I don't care if I make any money. [Making vodka] would be fun to do."

● I tried to research it. I went to the library, and it was like there had been a book burning—there weren't any books on distilling. So I went to a science library and got the fundamental stuff on ethanol. At first I built a little pot still and a condenser and a boiler; then I built a sixteen-gallon still and bought a catfish fryer rig from Academy to heat it up on. It was real rudimentary.

● I started out making flavored vodkas for my friends as Christmas presents. They were always telling me I should go out and sell them. I always thought they were trying to get some more free vodka.

● There were so many flavored vodkas on the shelf that didn't do any volume. So I said [to liquor store owners], "What does volume?" And they said, "What do you like to drink?" I said, "I like drinking [regular] vodka, but I've been known to drink anything." They said, "Vodka's a good category. If you could make a smooth vodka that a girl could drink straight, you might have something."

● It took us two years to get going. I tried to do a couple of rounds of financing, but nobody would put in. Everybody thought I was crazy. When I started, I had no employees. I'd make it myself and load it on the truck—I didn't have a forklift, so I did it a case at a time. I'd sleep in my car. When I did my grand opening, I couldn't get distribution. It was brutal. This whole project has been like that.

● To me, a good vodka should have a taste that tells you a little story. It shouldn't burn or make you squinch your face—nothing like that. You have to be able to sip it.

● I still hang out with people I grew up with, and I put my name on the label. I know that if I put a single subpar bottle of vodka on the market, somebody who has my cell phone number would be calling me and telling me, "Hey, man, I don't know what's going on, but this seems off." And that would be a nice way to put it.

INTERVIEW BY EVAN SMITH

