

A LONESTAR LIFE

Rising Spirits

PAULA ANGERSTEIN WANTS TO KEEP GROWING HER HOMEGROWN COMPANY

by Anthony Head / photos by Kirk Weddle

Speaking candidly at her elegant, comfortable home in Austin, Paula Angerstein sums up where **Paula's Texas Spirits** stands after eight years in business: "Sustainable, not so profitable, but enjoyable."

Even though her picture isn't on the bottles, she's quite recognizable around town, having cultivated strong relationships with bartenders, bar managers, bar owners and a multitude of off-premise accounts. She's also developed a grounded, healthy humor about growing the company.

"I've learned a lot about the Texas liquor business. I have to almost laugh at myself when I think about going into it back then," Paula says. "When people come to me and say, 'I want to sell my grandmother's hazelnut liqueur,' I go, 'Good. Why don't you go ahead with that?' [Paula's expression, though, asks, *Why on earth would you want to get into this business?*] They just don't see what's on the other side of that cliff."

Paula knows about that cliff because she holds the second permit granted by the state of Texas (issued in 2004) to distill hard spirits. "People focus on the creation, the fun part, the R&D. But then you have to get it on the shelves and keep it on the shelves," she tells me.


Her products—charcoal-filtered neutral grain-based spirit with hand-zested fresh orange and lemon—are indeed great: simple and intense when sipped straight, and even better when allowed to mingle with ice for a while. Because the local Margarita market is broad and deep, Paula's Texas Orange (40% abv) and Lemon (30% abv) Liqueurs—as well as Paula herself (undetermined % abv, but she makes strong cocktails for her guests)—are fully woven into the fabric of Austin's food and alcohol culture.

But even as her business closes in on the ten-year mark, Paula continues working with a small staff on a shoestring budget. She's not the head distiller anymore (those duties belong to Chris Roberts), but otherwise she steers the ship. "We're still working on hand-selling the product. It works. Yet, after so many years, brand awareness is actually low, despite being stocked at major liquor chain stores and dozens of on-premises locations throughout the state." (Distilled spirits will, apparently, never, ever, be sold in grocery stores in Texas.)

Having studied various distillers' guilds in Kentucky, Colorado, Oregon and other states, Paula is convinced that forming an official Texas distillery group would help everyone's sales. "The number-one item in the charter should be creating a brand for Texas spirits as a whole," she says.

But what about corralling the various personalities and agendas of the growing body of Texas craft distillers? When I ask if she'd be interested in heading up such a guild, Paula quietly replies, "Possibly." Her expression, though, asks, *Why on earth would I want to get into that mess?*

www.paulastexaspirits.com ■



Paula Angerstein has her hands full running Paula's Texas Spirits—but she wants to get busier.