

# LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

Ponyboy Slings debuts line of ready-to-drink bourbon cocktails at Total Wine & More



Mike and Janell Bass are the co-founders and co-CEOs of Ponyboy Slings, a bourbon-based RTD.  
Ponyboy Slings, Inc.

By [Stephen P. Schmidt](#) - Reporter

In the bourbon industry, time is famously known for going slow.

When it comes to the timeline of a Louisville-based startup, though, that has not been the rule.

Case in point: Ponyboy Slings Inc. — a company that is making ready-to-drink (RTD), carbonated, bourbon-based cocktails — was founded in 2021 by the husband/wife duo of Mike and [Janell Bass](#), who met at the end of 2020.

Now, 21 months after its founding, customers should expect to see the RTD cocktails on the shelves of Total Wine & More locations within Kentucky next month, and in select bars and restaurants in the city.

Janell, a Southern Indiana native, had come back to the area after living in Los Angeles for 10 years as a bartender and actor/voiceover professional to quarantine for the Covid-19 pandemic at her father's house in Floyds Knobs, Indiana.

After setting up close to a half dozen bars in his hometown of Orlando, Florida, Mike accepted an offer to come to Louisville to do cocktail consulting work for Hawthorn Innovations, a creative agency specializing in the food and beverage space.

Eight months after their first date in December 2020, Mike proposed to Janell in Paris that following August. Two months later the idea of the RTD startup began to form — and a month later the couple had a surprise wedding.



“We kind of hit the ground running,” Janell told me. “We kind of knew immediately: ‘Oh yeah, you’re great for me. Yes, this works. Let’s do this.’”

They also shared chemistry on their collective résumé, having approximately 40 years of combined experience in the bartending scene. In L.A., Janell was trained by level-5 sommelier and became a certified beer cicerone. At one point, Mike spent three years on the national cocktail competition circuit.

“Mike and I are very well versed in this world of creating cocktails,” Janell said, “so this has been a really fun opportunity for us to be able to share them with other people.”

In June 2021, the two future co-CEOs of Ponyboy Slings Inc., created Punchbowl Project, where they immediately began concocting cocktails for national restaurant chains and spirits brands, [as first reported by our news partner WKLY](#) in February.

“We decided when we started that we were just going to say yes to everything that came our way, and we would figure out what our niche would be,” said Janell, adding that some of their gigs included working events, party planning and doing brand activations. “We didn’t know exactly where we would land.”

As fate would have it, Janell and Mike were working at the Coaches for the Kids charity event in Lexington, Kentucky, in September 2021, where an undisclosed future investor happened to grab their business card after trying their cocktail.

Before long, that investor set up a meeting about putting their cocktails into canned RTD products. The co-CEOs declined to disclose how much capital the investor put in.

“We looked at each other and said, ‘Yeah let’s do this. This is going to be our thing,’” Janell said.

### **‘Use whiskey in other ways’**

The brand has three flavors: Bourbon Popstar (bourbon with dry vermouth, strawberry juice, lemon bitters and natural flavors), Derby Cream Soda (bourbon with sherry, aromatic bitters and natural flavors) and My Cherry Amour (bourbon with dry vermouth, sour black cherry juice, aromatic bitters and natural flavors).



Bourbon Popstar has been deemed as the flagship flavor after being their main go-to cocktails at events that they would take part in through their consulting company.

“We would fully carbonate [the cocktail], keg it and put it on tap and it went over really, really well,” Janell said. “The Popstar came about because we hadn’t realized it but we already had a test market from doing it at prior events ... We were basically showing you can use whiskey in other ways. It doesn't always have to be an Old Fashioned.”

One differentiator, Janell said, from other products in the growing RTD space is that the beverages do not use malt liquors or seltzers — opting for real fortified wines, fruit juices and bourbon.

The bourbon used is sourced from MGP Ingredients, Inc. (MGP), one of the largest producers of bulk whiskey in the world.

“We’re not a seltzer and we’re not a full-on translated cocktail to a glass of ice,” Janell said. “We’re right in the middle.”

Each flavor contains 7% alcohol by volume per can. The products, which are manufactured in a facility in the metro area of Raleigh, North Carolina, will be sold in packs of four with a suggested retail price of \$17.99.

The RTD market has steadily grown over the last several years. When [I spoke in January with Joe Goode](#), a senior vice president/beverage industry manager for Truist Financial, he told me that the category had experienced a 59.7% increase in volume in the last year in his most recent industry report at the time.

“I think they’re just getting started. I think RTDs are going to continue to do phenomenally well,” Goode told me then. “You saw the start with a vodka base. And now you're seeing interest and other spirit categories.”

In the last year, many different kinds of products have entered the market including Jim Beam's [launch of "Kentucky Coolers"](#) in March in partnership with The Boston Beer Co., the debut of rum-based based [Saltwater Woody RTDs](#) out of Louisville in June 2022, and Brown-Forman's collaboration with Coca-Cola for the [Jack and Coke cocktail RTD](#), which has been launched in several countries in recent months.

Mike said they did “100% of the formulation ourselves” when it came to creating what would go into the can, after consulting briefly with a food scientist.

Janell said their brand’s name serves as “tip of the hat to Kentucky.” They also have a dog named Whiskey who frequently is called “Whiskey Boy,” she said.

Fun is key, Janell said, citing the bright, “retro ’70s vibe” of the cans.

“We want people to drink something that is delicious and really well made,” she said, “but not take themselves so seriously.”



After getting established in Kentucky, the plan is to expand into the Nashville, Tennessee, market by next spring and then grow into other southern states.



Image: Ponyboy Slings, Inc.

The Ponyboy Slings logo and labeling features what Janell Bass called a "retro '70s vibe."

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