“I love drinking,” says Tremaine Atkinson. “In my 20s I was a home-brewer, like a lot of people. I really fell in love with that process. I never had the capital or the ability to get a business started, so I fell into the corporate world for 20 years,” he recalls. After burning out, Atkinson chose to pursue what he had always wanted. “Instead of doing a brewery I decided to do a distillery because I love vodka and the timing is better for vodka as opposed to beer.” Three years ago, he teamed up with longtime friend Mark Lewis to launch CH Distillery in Chicago. They transformed the ground floor of a six-story office building in the city into a distillery, complete with a bar and restaurant.

CH Distillery uses only local grains from nearby Midwestern farms to create its signature vodka. “We make our vodka all the way from scratch, from grains. We cook the grains with water, cool, ferment, distill,” Atkinson explains. “It’s essentially beer making. We make unflavored beer out of grains we use. We take the beer and distill it until just the beautiful vodka is left.” In addition to vodka, CH Distillery produces a gin, white rum, limoncello and amaro. “Our timing was pretty good to enter the Chicago market with a completely locally-made product that’s very much of interest to people.”

Atkinson says his distillery is unique in the way it produces vodka. “There are two ways to make vodka,” he explains. “Most vodka is made worldwide by taking industrial ethanol made in a factory, adding water, flavorings and you’re done. That way, you don’t need heat.” But since his product is made from scratch, they rely on heat to cook the grains. That’s where the Clayton Steam Generator comes in. “We use it for everything… everything we’re doing requires steam at some point.”

The 75-horsepower boiler was installed about 6 months before CH Distillery opened. The generator provides necessary heat for various steps throughout the distilling process, everything from mashing grains to refined distillation. Atkinson chose the Clayton product
because the footprint is compact enough for his urban space, the safety features ensure the machine won't explode, and also customer service.

The Clayton Steam Generator is an extremely reliable and efficient source of heat, notes Atkinson—so much so that when they decided to expand to a new facility, they installed new generators there. “The decision to go with them again for the next place was an easy one after the experience we had with the machinery, and the company.” This time, there are two, 200-horsepower generators.

California-based Clayton Industries started in 1930 and has become a leading manufacturer of equipment for industrial process steam generation—both fired boilers and unfired waste heat boilers. Clayton machines use controlled circulation and counter-flow design.

“The analogy I see is that if you’re a racecar driver, you have to have fuel,” Atkinson continues. “For a distillery the steam generator is like our fuel. Without it we can’t operate. Because it’s our source of heat for doing all the activities that require heat—which is pretty much all of them.”

The new space is under construction, and is expected to be completed at the end of 2016 or beginning of 2017.

“Roughly speaking, our capacity at our current facility is about 15,000 cases of product. At the new distillery it will be about 150,000 cases of product. We can expand it again to at least 300. It’s a really big step up in capacity. We’re still tiny compared to the big guys, but it’s big for us.

“Demand appears to be there and we don’t want to run out of product,” says Atkinson. Production of vodka and vodka-related products like gin will move completely to the new facility, and the distillery will be able to explore new additions to its product line. “Once we have the new location open, that will free up the old location to concentrate on our aged rum program. We also have a barrel house in the new facility,” Atkinson adds.

Atkinson looks forward to growing the brand and becoming a national player in vodka production.