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HEALTH & MEDICINE NEWS

Producing hand sanitizer makes sense for a distillery, but finding raw materials a daily grind

By LISA VERNON SPARKS
DAILY PRESS | APR 11, 2020





Russ Wesley answers the phone outside of Vanguard Brewpub and Distillery Wednesday afternoon April 8, 2020. The company recently began producing and selling hand sanitizer from a 1000 liter copper pot still that normally produces vodka, gin and whiskey. (Jonathon Gruenke / Daily Press)

HAMPTON — Like several other owners of distilleries in the area, Randy Thomas decided when the pandemic came to Hampton Roads to start making one of the hardest-to-find products — hand sanitizer.

After all, he already knew how to make liquor.

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His [Vanguard Brewpub & Distillery](#) in downtown Hampton has been at it for two weeks, but now he has a new problem — finding the ingredients.

“It’s not like we are buying a shipping container of raw goods. Every day, I have a new challenge,” Thomas said. “I am running low on spray bottles. I have product, but I don’t have bottles. In a couple of days, my challenge is going to be (getting) isopropyl alcohol.”

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That was Tuesday’s problem. On Wednesday, the company sold what it made and so the challenge again was looking for more spray bottles.

“Until I can get supply chains that are reliable, I can’t, I just don’t know ... what’s happening until that next day,” he said.

Thomas also needs hydrogen peroxide and glycerol. Hunting for the best deals online is a moving target in terms of prices — every day, he watches the rules of economics play out on his computer screen.

“You have a supplier that has given you a certain amount of stuff today, and you call them tomorrow and you can’t get it for two weeks. So, you go online and look, and

out, do I bite the bullet and buy that and continue to make it and ... drive my costs way out of whack?

“Everything is becoming more valuable,” Thomas said. “Spray bottles that were under a dollar (weeks ago) at 76 cents ... in the course of three days, it’s gone up to \$1.19.”

Making the hand sanitizer — last seen on most store shelves late January — has cut into his more lucrative core business. Thomas converts ethanol reserved to make the bourbon, gin or vodka he’d would normally produce.

“We had bourbon ready to go ... the raw spirit that was getting ready to go into barrels, was sitting in a stainless-steel tank. That volume of alcohol would have netted me in two years ... about \$26,000 worth of bourbon,” he said. “We are giving up a significant amount of revenue and future product.”

So far this week, Vanguard has made some 275 gallons of hand sanitizer.

Thomas is looking for new avenues to improve manufacturing capabilities. Vanguard is working with owners from [Ironclad Distillery](#), in neighboring Newport News to secure bulk raw materials.

“We are constantly helping each other out,” he said. “(Ironclad) was buying plastic containers and I found bulk hydrogen peroxide. We are helping each other to bulk-source the ingredients. We are trying to achieve the same.”

Kara King, a co-owner at Ironclad, said she spent part of Thursday morning hunting down glycerol. She ultimately drove to Virginia Beach to fetch the haul, then drop off some to Vanguard, before heading back to her shop at 124 23rd Street.

“The hand sanitizer business is booming but sourcing all the ingredients to get is a wild goose chase. There is a shortage of everything,” King said. “It’s worth it because

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Ironclad mainly sells in bulk to businesses. The company also donates supplies to hospitals, first responders, hospices and other organizations that really need it, King said.

For now, Thomas is selling his hand sanitizer outside his restaurant at 504 N. King Street, in various sizes, but he also is looking at other channels.

With a strong ready-made market, Thomas already has secured orders with the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Langley Air Force Base Hospital, Hampton VA Medical Center and other medical facilities, he said.

“It’s kind of my only source of revenue. It’s definitely a commitment once people expect you to have it,” Thomas said. “Until there’s no need for hand sanitizer, or they open up and let us go back to our normal course of business, I’m going to keep doing it.”

Topics: [coronavirus](#), [hand sanitizers](#), [Vanguard](#), [distillery](#), [liquor](#), [Ironclad Distillery](#)

Lisa Vernon Sparks



Lisa Vernon Sparks covers Hampton for the Daily Press. Previously, she was an assistant digital editor at WYDaily.com and a staff writer for the Providence Journal, the Star-Ledger and the Home News Tribune. She holds feature writing awards from the Rhode Island Press Association.

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NEWS

Patrick's hardware a fixture in a Hampton neighborhood known for change

By LISA VERNON SPARKS
DAILY PRESS | MAR 22, 2020





Cary Patrick is reflected in a mirror as he helps a customer while working at Patrick's Hardware in Hampton Thursday March 12, 2020. The store is celebrating 125 years of business. (Jonathon Gruenke / Daily Press)

HAMPTON — When W.T. Patrick set up his Hampton general store in 1895, he was open to selling anything.

The shop initially offered odds and ends, such as ladies' boots and hat pins. Later it sold cars, had a grease pit and even tried to hawk condoms.

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“So, my grandfather wrote the Youngs Rubbers Company, they sold Trojan rubbers,” Cary Patrick, Jr. said, referring to a letter that’s now framed and hangs on the wall. “It was like two days later the response came back. Said they only sold to authorize pharmacists. We were a drug store, but not registered pharmacists.”

The business eventually found its niche – hardware. It’s something the Patrick family has done exceedingly well.

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The West Queen Street fixture was poised to celebrate its 125-year anniversary with patrons at the end of March, but that will be postponed because of the 10-person limit on gatherings due to the coronavirus, he said.

“We are open, but with this situation, it’s probably wise to delay it,” Patrick said Saturday. “We still have a lot of people working and have been fairly busy and will stay open unless the situation changes.”

Since opening, Patrick’s Hardware has expanded to include a custom glass service with a separate location called Patrick’s Glass, exactly 100 years after the main business opened. Located on Armistead Avenue, the branch began in a back room of the 100,000 square-foot original building.

paint, bikes and keys and such, along with sons, Cary Patrick III and Ryan Patrick. The family also runs a glass business in Norfolk.

After four generations, and surviving the big-box retailer invasion, Patrick says the secret to success is the same as it was from the day his grandfather opened.

“We just treat customers like family, and this is a very, very simple philosophy, how we operate, it’s just, treat people how you want to be treated, so it’s nothing complicated,” Patrick said.

The work ethic was mighty, with the family often working long hours.

Patrick joined the business fresh out of college in 1976.

Dillon Mays stocks a shelf while working at Patrick's Hardware in Hampton Thursday March 12, 2020. The store is

“They told me when I started working that vacation meant you were sick and retirement meant you were dead,” he said. “That was probably passed down from the first guy.”

As customers mill throughout the space, searching for hardware items, the store has a few relics laying around and an odd collection of items not for sale – antique farm tools, thick catalog books, even a stuffed fox and raccoon. Many of these items are place inside an old massive bookcase, inherited from a Hampton apothecary, Patrick said.

A lingering odor wafts through the store Patrick said it’s likely from when the company sold creosote or turpentine that was kept in 55-gallon drums, he said.

In addition to his sons, Patrick employees some six salesclerks and a couple of bookkeepers, many of whom have been with the business for more than two decades.

“It’s a great compliment to your staff when ... the customer wants ... your employees to wait on them instead of you,” he said.

Lee’s corner

Revitalization is coming to the Olde Hampton neighborhood.

New homes are cropping up in the area and housing values are on the uptick, a positive effect from nearly \$50 million in investments by the Hampton Redevelopment and Housing Authority since 2005.

A vacant lot across the street from Patrick’s Hardware is slated for 24 new homes - to be called Queens River.

But for at least a decade or longer, the neighborhood bounded by Settlers Landing Road, Armistead, West Pembroke and LaSalle avenue had been synonymous with blight and disinvestment. Redevelopment that came through during the 1960s and 1970s is largely the cause of that.

Today, Patrick's Hardware is a loner at the corner of Back River Road and Queen Street. Charles Marshall, 80, grew up in the neighborhood and remembers when it thrived with multiple businesses.

Back in the heyday of the 1940s and 50s, locals called the intersection of Queens Street and Back River, Lee's corner, Marshall said. It was named for a grocery store called R.C. Lee, right across from Patrick's Hardware. Its name was engraved in the sidewalk.

Old photo of A.W. Patrick Patrick's Hardware and Glass in Hampton. It's a father and two sons. Patrick's Hardware business has been around since 1895 started by Cary Patrick's grandfather. (Joe Fudge / Daily Press)

“He had ... a big two-story building. If you stood on the Patrick side, you could see the engraving on the sidewalk, plus it was engraved on the top of the building,” Marshall said. “On the side where the bus stop was, the engraving was in red letters.”

The neighborhood had a few grocery stores, a fish market, a pool hall and a black-owned restaurant called “The Rush,” he said.

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“It was a close-knit neighborhood, and everyone knew everyone, and everyone looked out for everybody. Between the grocery stores and W.T., it was the heart of the neighborhood,” Marshall said. “My grandfather worked there for over 50 years. Everything on Queens Street is gone except W.T. Patrick’s.”

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Carolyn Mann, 76, also fondly remembers Lee’s corner and Patrick’s from her youth

“We knew that they were white, but they treated us as equals, so that’s why the black community supported them,” Mann said. “A lot of young people ... worked

unique store.”

Patrick said the goal is to have repeat business and to do that you need to treat people well.

“(My grandfather) would extend credit to both blacks and whites with a handshake,” he said. “Back in those days a handshake was as good as their word, a handshake was their bond.”

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Lisa Vernon Sparks



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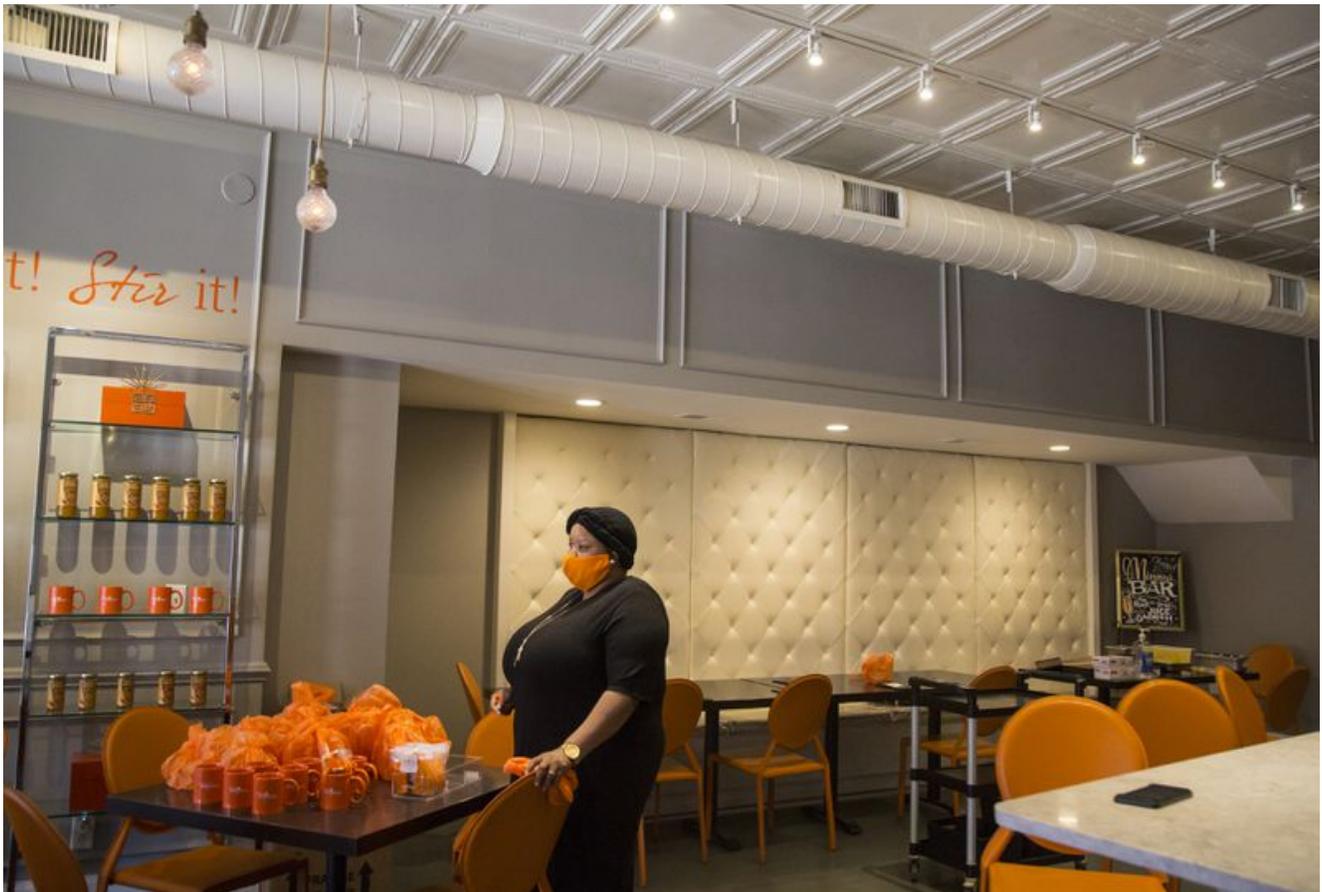
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CONSUMER & RETAIL BUSINESS

Lots of prayer, baked cookies and conversation: Hampton entrepreneur juggles business and family during a pandemic

By LISA VERNON SPARKS
DAILY PRESS | APR 26, 2020





Simply Panache brand owner Lakesha Brown-Renfro is photographed next to a display of care packages inside of Mango Mangeaux, A Simply Panache Bistro, on Wednesday, April 22, 2020, in Hampton, Va. The packages include a mug, tea, mango preserves and a handmade mask. (Kaitlin McKeown/Daily Press)

HAMPTON — Lakesha Brown-Renfro donned an orange face mask and hopped into her car — the outing last week was her first in nearly a month.

Bedeviled by allergies and worried by the pandemic, she had been home-bound since March, adhering to Virginia’s stay-at-home guidelines.

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Covid-19 has left no part of her life untouched – her businesses are suffering, her family is adjusting.

For the 44-year-old hospitality business owner, wife and mother, rearranging life since the widespread shutdown around Hampton Roads has been anything but easy.

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“It’s been complicated to say the least,” she said. And it has presented a different juggling act for Renfro.

She co-owns, along with Tanecia Willis and Nzinga Teule-Hekima, the Simply Panache brand: seven business ventures – including Mango Mangeaux: A Simply Panache Bistro on Mellen Street in Phoebus.

The ventures, including two boutique hotels, a spa and nail salon, a lounge and a venue space, are all hospitality and service-based. They among some of the biggest industries scrambling to stay afloat because of all the shutdowns.

“Pretty much every business is at a halt, with the exception of our Bistro, and our mango production company,” Renfro said.

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She's also a wife and the mother of a college-age daughter, Avery Renfro, who suddenly found herself home from school.

"That was pretty much a shock," Avery Renfro said. "My dorm was my happy place. My whole semester is done. I'm going to have to transfer to online."

Out of the shark tank

In 2013, Renfro and her partners took a dive into the "Shark Tank" – the business reality television show – and pitched the Mango Mangeaux preserve product.

They didn't get a deal, but the exposure was a catalyst, putting the Simply Panache brand on the map. The recipe sales catapulted the trio into a million-dollar company. It was Renfro's home-cooked mango recipe she tweaked with the help of Willis and Teule-Hekima. But the tradition of preserving fruits came from her grandmother.

"My grandmother used to preserve figs and strawberries and things like that," she said. "Mango, that was new age."

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At the 33 Mellen St. location is the bistro and across the street, there are two boutique hotels called Simply Panache Place, and The Hampton, an event venue. On Mallory Street is a Simply Panache Nail Bar & Pedi Spa.

In November, Renfro and company launched The Noir, a membership-based lounge. The business partners landed a lease at the former American Legion post at

There also is the production unit that creates the mango preserves, which the company sells to suppliers and online.

Business during a pandemic

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the business and restaurants in general.

As of Friday, Simply Panache has six salaried employees, down from a usual team of at least 40. Most of those were waitstaff, bartenders and housekeepers.

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“We’ve had to lay them off. All of our team members ... are either unemployed or, you know, doing something else,” Renfro said. “We’re really close to our team. It’s, been heartbreaking to, you know, be at home and try to figure this out.”

While bookings at the boutique hotels and event venues have been postponed until further notice, Simply Panache has been able to keep the bistro open for online orders and curbside pick-up.

Renfro also spends much of her workday – which frequently lasts past midnight – on the computer, checking social media analytics, communicating with her marketing staff via email, or talking with customers.

The company has come up with promotions and has provided more than 1,200 lunches to Hampton schoolchildren in March right after schools shut down.

“This has really been critical for us to do all of these things, because this is one of the hardest things that we’ve all had to do in our lifetime,” she said. “And we know that everybody is out here, kind of trying, you know, kind of struggling.”

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Additionally, working with business partners Willis and Teule-Hekima, Renfro launched a line of protective masks. The masks are packaged in a care kit, including a teacup, a mango-flavored tea sachet and the mango preserves.

“We have a lot going on right now. A physician (Nzinga) who’s on the front lines, to Tanecia making masks, to myself coming up with the ideas to try to keep this thing

us have actually closed."

Dr. Teule-Hekima, 46, the former director of the Peninsula Health District in Hampton, works in a hospital at night. She divides her time there and managing the business operations and trying to secure the federal loans available to small businesses with team members.

"I feel like we have been just as busy as ever," Teule-Hekima said. "As a physician, I am literally on the front lines. For me, this takes on an added significance. We want to support all the front-line people who are at the grocery store and people who are considered essential personnel."

Willis, 43, a critical care nurse, who generally manages the company's information technology, organized the mask production. Roughly 100 have been sewn so far.

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"It's a different kind of busy," Willis said, adding you must take it one day, one week, at a time. "You can't just exert all your energy, like a sprint. It's a marathon."

Prayers, baked cookies and conversation

Last fall, Renfro and her husband Laron Renfro bid farewell to their 18-year-old daughter Avery. She was headed for her freshman year at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

She got used to college life, "getting the hang of the ... course load," and lived in a suite with slew of dorm mates, she said. Avery Renfro enjoyed being far enough from home, but close enough to dip in on weekends and pick up a few shifts at the family business.

She came home for spring break in early March. She's still there.

“All my friends were texting me, ‘oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, we’re not going back on campus. You can’t go back,’ ” she said. “What do you mean we can’t go back, like all my stuff is still in the dorm?”

Avery figured it wouldn’t be that tough, and planned to pick up some shifts at the business. Her mother had other plans, because of the stay-at-home order.

Lakesha Brown-Renfro talks with her daughter, Avery, 18, outside of Mango Mangeaux, A Simply Panache Bistro, on Wednesday, April 22, 2020, in Hampton, Va. The coronavirus pandemic forced Avery Brown-Renfro, a first-year student at Virginia Commonwealth University, to return home from college. (Kaitlin Mckeown / Daily Press)

“Avery, you’re not going to be able to work,” she said her mom told her. “I’m going to have to literally be a couch potato and sit at home and just do homework and watch TV?”

The college freshman wasn’t even allowed to sit in the car and listen to music at first, she said.

“That was difficult because I’m so used to making decisions on my own, especially out in Richmond,” Avery Renfro said. “That aspect of it was difficult being told what you can and can’t, do all over again.”

Between trying to soothe a frustrated college student, and a husband as the only one going outside to pick up groceries, and supplies for the businesses, things did get hectic, Renfro said.

But there was an upside to it all the disruption.

“It’s slowed us down. It’s brought us to the table together,” Renfro said. “We’re eating together more often and making sure that we are praying together more often. I’ve told everyone on my team ... that’s what I do when I wash my hands, I don’t sing Happy Birthday. I say a prayer.”

A Houston, Texas native, Renfro and her husband have close ties there. The couple has connecting with extended family in the evenings, doing prayer and Bible study, something they didn’t do often before.

The family also bakes cookies together – chocolate-chip oatmeal with pecan – something that has become a treat, Avery Renfro said.

“I will say, we spend so much more time together now and our relationship has grown more during this quarantine,” she said.

The road back

Renfro knows the road back to pre-pandemic business will take months.

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“Every day, we’re losing money, we’re losing training,” she said. “We’re losing so much opportunity that it’s going to take a lot for us to come back and be whole again.”

Renfro is also concerned about her fellow business neighbors on Mellen Street.

“This community is about synergy,” Renfro said of Phoebus. “I think that we kind of need to go back to the table. And pun intended, everybody needs to get back to the table. We need the people in our community to do well because diversity ... brings more people. If one person on the street is thriving and no one else is, then we are not going to survive.”

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