

# BUILT ON



At the forefront of the city's beer revival, **HARDYWOOD PARK CRAFT BREWERY** celebrates its first decade ██████████ by **EILEEN MELLON** | photos by **JUSTIN CHESNEY**









hen **ERIC MCKAY** and **PATRICK MURTAUGH**

opened **HARDYWOOD** Park Craft Brewery in **2011**, their mission was to become the **MOST RESPECTED BREWERY** in the country.

In the **10 YEARS** since, they have achieved **GLOBAL SUCCESS** with beers such as their famed **GINGERBREAD STOUT**, collected accolades and **WORLD BEER CUP** medals, and been featured in publications ranging from **FORBES** to **PASTE** magazine. But it's here in **RICHMOND** where they have humbly **EARNED THE TITLE** they first sought to gain, emerging as the **LEADERS** of the local **CRAFT BEER RENAISSANCE**.

When Hardywood opened, Legend was the only other local brewery. Today, the region is home to more than 40 breweries, boasting James Beard Award-nominated brewers and highly sought-after beers that some enthusiasts travel hundreds of miles to buy. The region's beer scene has evolved from a grassroots movement led by homebrewers and hobbyists into a tourism draw that's embedded in the city's identity.

At an abandoned warehouse at 2408 Ownby Lane, located in a former German brewing district, best friends McKay and Murtaugh kick-started a sudsy revolution.

A decade later, Richmond has become a city built on beer.

## ROOTED IN RICHMOND

Although the origin story of beer in Richmond dates to 1607, with settlers from Jamestown drinking beer on the banks of the James River, its most recent chapter began in the late 1990s with breweries such as Mobjack Bay, Main Street Beer Co., James River Brewing Co. and Richbrau (a brand that has since been reincarnated by new owners).

Legend, the city's oldest brewery and pub, released the first batch of its iconic brown ale at Commercial Taphouse in 1995. Though Legend still exists today, Richmond's first wave of small craft breweries peaked at the end of the '90s with national brands of domestic beers dominating the market.

"There was a period where beer lacked consistency," says Lee Graves, a native Richmonder and the author of "Virginia Beer: A Guide From Colonial Days to Craft's Golden Age." "Business models by hobbyists were not sustainable to a large degree, and there wasn't the support [of] the government entities that exists now."

Homebrewing was en vogue, with many beer nerds flocking to James River Home Brewers, the oldest continuing homebrew-

ers club in the country. Meetings were originally held in members' homes, then at Legend and today at Mekong, a Vietnamese restaurant next door to owner An Bui's celebrated The Answer Brewpub, which opened in 2014.

"It was very common back then to go to Mekong, and you would see people you knew — sort of the 'Cheers' of the craft beer community," says Annie Tobey, a local craft beer journalist and certified cicerone, or expert in the field of beer.

While an underground beer culture was beginning to gain steam, McKay and Murtaugh were looking for a place to start their own craft brewery. They were originally set on opening in Charlotte, North Carolina, but when McKay moved to Richmond in 2009 as marketing director for the Sheehan Family Companies after its purchase of Specialty Beverage, he saw potential here.

"I felt like Richmond culturally felt much more like a beer city," he says.

McKay, Hardywood's president, was raised in Connecticut, and brewmaster Murtaugh grew up in New York City. Their parents were friends, and the duo spent summers together at Woodridge Lake in Goshen, Connecticut, catching frogs, exploring nature and, eventually, discovering a love for beer. The two formed a bond that has played a major role in their success.

While attending Davidson College, McKay studied abroad in Australia, working at Hardywood Park Farm in New South Wales,

BELOW: COURTESY ERIC MCKAY AND PATRICK MURTAUGH







(From left) Hardywood Park Farm in Australia, which inspired the name for the brewery; co-founders Patrick Murtaugh (left) and Eric McKay

ing craft beer wholesalers. They were slowly learning about the beer industry.

Wanting to immerse themselves further, the duo returned to school. McKay graduated from Fordham, earning his MBA, and Murtaugh attended Siebel Institute of Technology, the oldest brewing school in the United States, with campuses in Chicago and Germany.

While there, Murtaugh discovered that his great-grandfather had also been a Siebel student and a former brewmaster from Germany who worked in Springfield, Massachusetts.

"I was blown away, and sure enough, when I went in the next day, there's pics in every single class starting from 1900, and about 2 feet from where I had been sitting for the past few weeks was his [photo], and a few down was my great-uncle," Murtaugh recalls.

After building a 10-year foundation of knowledge between homebrewing and their experience in the field, McKay and Murtaugh were ready to open their own brewery. Looking for financing, they approached banks, which were still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, only to be laughed at and denied loans.

"They were like, 'It doesn't seem like the city can support more than one brewery,'" McKay says, noting that they even offered equipment as collateral.

Plowing ahead, the pair launched a \$1.3 million fundraising campaign, falling just shy of its goal, raising \$1 million from private investors within 18 months. On Oct. 22, 2011, McKay and Murtaugh opened the doors of their 20-barrel brewhouse.

Singel, Hardywood's first release, was a Belgian blonde ale inspired by a trip Murtaugh took while attending brewing school. It has since become their flagship brew. "No breweries were doing a Belgian blonde ale as their flagship beer," he says. "It was a little risky."

**'CHRISTMAS IN A BOTTLE'**  
Shortly after opening, the Hardywood >

where he spent days in the fields and nights drinking as much of the owner's homebrew as he liked.

"I thought it was the best beer I ever tasted," McKay recalls. "It was the first time I had ever had a beer with really malt flavor that was amber in color."

He excitedly shared his discovery with Murtaugh, who came to visit the farm, and the friends, barely 21 years old, decided to start homebrewing together. "That would be our next adventure," Murtaugh says.

Working as a brewer's apprentice and bar manager post-college, McKay landed

a gig at a hedge fund in New York City. Murtaugh, a University of New Hampshire graduate, joined the comedy troupe Upright Citizens Brigade in New York and landed several acting roles, including voiceovers in national campaigns for McDonald's and Lipton.

Simultaneously, they were also growing hops in friends' backyards and experimenting at home. In the early 2000s, they both got jobs with the first Manhattan craft beer sales team at Union Beer Distributors, the New York division of the Sheehan Family Companies, one of America's lead-





founders received visits from two people who would change the fate of the brewery, helping to catapult it onto the global stage.

The first was Brian Nelson, an experienced homebrewer, engineer and Virginia Tech graduate who walked in with samples of his saison, brown ale and bohemian pilsner, a beer that McKay says is nearly impossible to brew at home.

"We were like, 'Here's the test,' and cracked the bottle, and it made that signature click," McKay says. "Usually it gushes and is overflowing or [there's] no carbonation."

"[Brian] had a brewing system that was better than mine," adds Murtaugh with a chuckle. "It looked like a tiny brewery in his shed."

They had found their head brewer.

The second visitor was Bill Cavendar of Casselmonte Farms, who brought in rhizomes of the Hawaiian white ginger he grew in Powhatan, speaking about them like a proud parent.

Eager to support local growers, an early initiative Hardywood has continued by using more than 30,000 pounds per year of Virginia-grown ingredients, they were on board.

Months later, Hardywood debuted Gingerbread Stout, a boozy 9.2% ABV imperial milk stout featuring Cavendar's ginger. The beer inspired a series of brews dedicated to local ingredients, such as Virginia Blackberry and Farmhouse Pumpkin.

Gingerbread Stout received a rare 100 rating from BeerAdvocate in 2012. Only a half-dozen beers had ever received a perfect score. The glowing review read, "Tastes like freagin' Christmas in a bottle actually, with layer upon layer building on the palate with each sip. Hell, they even nailed the damn sugary frosting on the gingerbread man. Run, run as fast as you can!"

"We got a text from our graphic artist, and I was sure it was Photoshopped," says McKay, recalling how he received the news.

That same year, Gingerbread Stout earned a bronze medal

(From left) Hardywood West Creek; the acclaimed Gingerbread Stout; the newly renovated Ownby Lane location; Head Brewer Brian Nelson and VP of Operations Kate Lee

in the popular herb and spice beer category at the prestigious World Beer Cup, dubbed "the Olympics of beer."

At the second Gingerbread Stout release in 2013, more than 1,000 people lined up to snag a bottle. The hype surrounding the beer was something that had never been seen before locally.

"It was that first beer to start that culture of consumers lining up and seeking the higher-end kind of beers that deserved to be waited for and camped out for, which has become a pretty normal thing in the culture," says Adam Worcester, co-founder of Triple Crossing Beer.

## SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

Although Hardywood's brews were well-received, on the production side, the brewery was struggling to keep up. Growing at 100% per year initially, they quickly reached max capacity, and despite taking significant pay cuts and relying on volunteers for everything from packaging to pickups, it became clear that trying to make it as a wholesale brewer wasn't feasible long term.

"We didn't know how we would stay afloat from a financial standpoint," McKay recalls.

Virginia law prohibited taprooms and on-premise sales of beer, one of the most effective ways for breweries to engage and interact with customers. Being unable to reach their core audience in a meaningful way was a huge hurdle for Hardywood.





"We ultimately felt like the taproom was an essential thing for us to sustain ourselves, and most other states allowed for them," McKay says.

They hired a lobbyist for \$5,000, a large investment at the time, and went to the General Assembly to tell the story of what craft brewing and taprooms could bring to Richmond: jobs, culture and tourism. They were joined by Virginia beer industry colleagues such as Mark Thompson from Starr Hill Brewery and Steve Cardinal from Devil's Backbone Brewing Company.

They knew that if Senate Bill 604 passed, it could be their lifeline.

Sponsored by state Sen. Jeffrey L. McWater, the bill stated that breweries could obtain a license to sell, serve and sample their own beer on site in taprooms, a practice that now seems unremarkable in beer culture.

"I remember posting a pic the day we went out lobbying, ... and a lot of the responses were things like, 'It will never happen, this is Virginia,' and then came

the vote," says McKay, noting that the bill almost got tabled by the House of Delegates, with some grumbling about breweries becoming places of debauchery and general chaos.

In January 2012, Gov. Bob McDonnell signed SB 604 into law at Hardywood, unknowingly sparking a new era of craft brewing. "I don't think anybody imagined it would have the full impact it has," Graves says.

"It was a game changer for Virginia beer and for us; we really embraced that period of growth in the industry," McKay says. "The ability to operate the taproom has been the biggest asset to create a meaningful brand and interest in new releases."

Instead of relying on distribution, which had been a challenge for local, lesser-known breweries such as Hardywood, with its beers competing against well-recognized mainstream brands, beer drinkers could come to them.

"[SB 604] really opened the door for people who were small-business entre-

preneurs," says Graves, noting that many hobbyists now saw the opportunity for careers in the beer industry.

A number of new breweries launched in the region. Rockville's Midnight Brewery opened in late 2011, as did Tony Ammendolia's Final Gravity, a homebrewing store in Lakeside that would later turn into a taproom in 2015. Ashland's Center of the Universe debuted from brothers Chris and Phil Ray in 2012, and the state's first farm brewery, Lickinghole Creek, opened in Goochland in 2013, along with Strangeways Brewing in Richmond.

Before opening Ardent Craft Ales in >





Scott's Addition in 2014, Tom Sullivan and his partners hosted unofficial beer pop-ups at a rented Church Hill garage every Sunday, pouring experimental brews for neighbors and friends. Building the business plan over a few years, Sullivan says one of the early obstacles was persuading bankers and investors to pour money into a fairly unknown model.

"It was kind of hard to prove that the business was going to work and be profitable," he says. "But if someone was skeptical, all you had to do was ask them to meet you at Hardywood on a Thursday for a beer and say, 'Look around, dude.' "

Brown Distributing Co. was also taking notice of craft beer. In 2012, its "Taste the Local" campaign showcased Virginia-made beers. "We saw a future and wanted to support a community," says Brown Vice President Jon Greene, noting that when he first joined the company 17 years ago, the majority of their accounts were national brands, and today those are just a handful.

## RICHMOND BEER RUSH

Although SB 604 helped to break down the barrier to entry for up-and-coming brewers, much of the beer world was still uncharted territory locally. Many aspiring brewery owners were familiar with malt and hops, not business plans and community engagement.

Sullivan says he turned to McKay and Murtaugh for support, a sentiment echoed by a number of other local brewery owners. Despite watching competitors emerge, Hardywood shared successes, lessons learned and mistakes made.

"[They] really set the standard here in Richmond for friendly competition and openness in general, and I think that's one of the main strengths we have still as a beer community," Sul-

livan says. "When starting a small manufacturing and hospitality and event business rolled into one, one of your most valuable commodities is your time, so their willingness to share their time with us and answer our questions says everything."

Homebrewers looking to dip their toes into the professional side of beer had few options for employment, and many of them landed at Hardywood. "They trained a generation of brewers here in Richmond," Sullivan says. "The first guys to start up couldn't just go to a job board and look for 'brewer.' "

Hardywood's first employee, head brewer Nelson, has mentored some of the city's finest, often first-time, brewers, who have moved on to head operations at The Veil Brewing Co., Bingo Beer Co., Steam Bell Beer Works, Garden Grove Brewing, Tabol Brewing, Main Line Brewery, Canon & Draw, Stone Brewing, and more.

"It's humbling for me," Nelson says. "I try to do the best I can as far as brewing and teaching those that come through and being a good manager and mentor for people."

Another brewer looking to turn his homebrewing gig into a professional career was Worcester, along with Triple Crossing Beer co-founders Jeremy Wirtes and Scott Jones. Fans of big, hoppy beers such as The Alchemist's Heady Topper and Maine Beer Co.'s Dinner, they saw a gap in the local scene.

Worcester recalls an important conversation with Strangelways Brewing founder Neil Burton. "He told me you have to have



**"If someone was skeptical, all you had to do was ask them to MEET YOU AT HARDYWOOD on a Thursday for a beer and say, 'Look around, dude.' "**

— Tom Sullivan,  
**ARDENT CRAFT ALES**







In January 2012 at Hardywood, Gov. Bob McDonnell signed SB 604 into law, allowing on-site sales, service and sampling of beer at Virginia breweries.

some sort of thing, right? You need that schtick," he says. "We naturally moved into realizing you do have to offer something that gives your brewery a unique voice."

For Triple Crossing, the answer was Falcon Smash, a juicy New England-style IPA that has graced lists ranging from Vine Pair's 25 Most Important IPAs to the top 10 list of Paste magazine's blind tasting, and it remains their top-produced beer.

As the beer scene has expanded, each brewery works to establish its own distinct identity.

"I'm really proud of where we've come in the past 10 years as a brewing community," says McKay, who is chair of the Virginia Craft Brewers Guild. "Although there's a healthy dose of competition, a lot of brewers are trying to be respectful of niches their colleagues have formed and let each brewery shine with the area or style they focus on."

## HOME IS WHERE THE HOPS ARE

Though the crest of the new wave of breweries occurred in 2015-16, there was also something else slowly fermenting — a local beer community and culture.

"The one thing that people didn't foresee so much was the taproom culture that has grown and proliferated," Graves says.

"People seek community, and taprooms are a wonderful way to foster that. It's a place to go and feel at home."

At any given brewery on a Saturday afternoon, parents cradle babies and beers simultaneously, mingling with 20-somethings, dedicated hop-heads and others.

Taprooms are an environment where young people can see adults consuming alcohol responsibly. "It's not a saloon or bar," Graves says. "Kids can watch that, and it demystifies alcohol for them. It's a very European idea."

Breweries host bike clubs and restaurant industry pop-ups, along with movie and trivia nights, Oktoberfest celebrations, makers markets, festivals, and live music, offering a new way for people to experience the city and each other. They have also birthed groups such as Richmond Beeristoric, a nonprofit that works to highlight and promote the past and present of suds in the city, and a Richmond chapter of the Pink Boots Society, which celebrates women in beer.

During its first summer, Hardywood introduced a food truck court, a weekly gathering that still takes place today. Food trucks and beer have remained a quintessential pairing, but in recent years, some breweries have added more permanent culinary options, from the Mexican

restaurant Y Tu Mama at The Veil's Forest Hill Avenue location to in-house kitchens at Ardent and Fine Creek Brewing. Hardywood's Ownby Lane location has added an in-house pizza concept from Executive Chef Dave Draper.

In 2018, after years of planning, McKay and Murtaugh opened a 60-barrel brew-house on 24 acres in Goochland. The West Creek facility now serves as Hardywood's main production space, while the Ownby Lane location, which recently underwent renovations, focuses on small-batch, experimental offerings.

Hardywood, Virginia's first brewery powered entirely by renewable energy, is no longer looking to move into new markets, and it has even pulled out of some, instead returning to a focus on Richmond. "[Expansion] was proving to be more of a distraction and taking attention away from our home market, which is most important to us," McKay says.

In the past decade, that market has exploded. Craft beer can be found on tap at Richmond's top restaurants and in coolers at gas stations. The city is dotted with places such as The Veil, which specializes in hop-heavy beers and fruited sours. Curious beer drinkers can be found sipping 4-ounce pours of dessert-like smoothie-style beers brewed with blueberries and marshmallow at The Answer. Richmond is home to the only East Coast location of California-based Stone Brewing and a second location for Charlottesville's Starr Hill.

"The quality of beer being produced in Richmond is top-notch," Graves says. "I've been all around the country in the U.K. and Germany and Belgium, and Richmond really can hold its head up high."

"We felt like we'd much rather be a part of a thriving brewing community that was respected for its beer," McKay says. "We hope by being collaborative and transparent with other breweries, that we could ... foster an overall great brewing town — and it's existing right now." 