

Roll out the barrel!

Distillery, microbrewery share some oak.

Jessica Strelitz

Photos by Aaron Spicer

A. Smith Bowman has been producing its flagship bourbon, Virginia Gentleman, for nearly seven decades, and has now started down a new path toward micro-distilling...and beer.

With master distiller Truman Cox at the helm, Bowman has entered the small batch bourbon and rye world. Cox, a chemist by training, took over when Bowman's distiller Joe Dangler retired after 33 years. After getting his successor up to speed, Dangler handed over the reins to "Mary"—the towering copper still that is now the star of the distillery's daily tours.

Guests can sample the trio of micro-distilled whiskies, from the smooth and fruity Bowman Brothers, to the bolder John J. Bowman single-barrel, and finish with a splash of spicy Abraham Bowman Limited Edition rye. Bottles are hand-filled and -numbered on site, and Cox will even sign the label if you ask.

Cox is working to expand availability of the new line of spirits, as well as Bowman's boutique vodka, gin and dark rum—which are only available for purchase in the distillery and Virginia ABC stores—in to Maryland and D.C. later this year.

The small staff tends to thousands of new oak barrels throughout the warehouse along Deep Run Lake in Fredericksburg, Va. It was these barrels that caught the eye of Jeff Fitzpatrick, owner of nearby Blue & Gray Brewing Co.

"I'd drive past the bourbon storage room almost every day and there they were, right in front of me. They were like the girl next door; around all the time and then one day, 'Wham! She's beautiful, and I can't live without her.' It was the perfect marriage," Fitzpatrick stated in an e-mail.

Fitzpatrick, a veteran craft brewer who'd already amassed a cult following for his creative concoctions, had recently finished a Russian imperial stout dubbed "Temporary Insanity" that clocked in at a whopping 13% alcohol by volume. He was carefully parceling it out, and needed a place to store it. Enter Bowman's spent barrels.

The result of the marriage was Minor Dementia—Blue & Grey's Temporary Insanity after being aged for six weeks or more in oak barrels still heady with vanilla and caramel notes from the bourbon that occupied the same barrel before. Fitzpatrick only releases the thick, dark beer twice a year in the early winter and on St. Patrick's Day, when the brewery hosts a parade and party for 800 people to celebrate its anniversary. This March marked No. 12.

Fitzpatrick started making beer in his apartment in Arlington in the mid 1990s, while working for the National Academy of Public

Administration. Traveling around the region, he found himself drawn to Fredericksburg and believed the area would be a supportive home for the microbrewery he dreamed of opening.

Blue & Gray does a heavy business in growler fills (the large jugs of fresh brewed beer aficionados love), and on a recent Saturday morning people were lined up before opening waiting for a fresh fix.

"My beer is not designed to sit, it's designed to drink," Fitzpatrick said. Blue & Gray beer is only sold in Virginia, and he says that allows him to focus on being a truly local brewer.

He produces four flavors year round, including the popular Irish-style ale Fred Red, which will also be the next beer to book time in a Bowman barrel. Two or three seasonal beers are available at any time, ranging from a Christmas Cranberry ale infused with tart fruit to an unfiltered Virginia Hefeweizen made with German Wiensthephan yeast and American wheat. Requests for an orange slice will be met with an eye roll (so don't).

In January 2010, Fitzpatrick and his wife expanded Blue & Gray's reach into food, opening a 100-seat restaurant in the warehouse space adjacent to their brewing operations. Lori Fitzpatrick is a self-taught cook and co-designed the menu at the Blue & Gray Brewpub with local ingredients and her husband's eclectic beer collection in mind.

"They are great people making amazing food and really food beer," Cox said about the team at Blue & Gray, which also hosts tours that allow guests to taste beer at all stages of development.

Corned beef is brined in stout; the ribs and mussels get beer baths; there's lager in the salad dressings and spiced ale in the sweet potatoes. Wine from five Virginia vineyards and Foggy Ridge ciders were added to the menu this year.

"I hugged half the people who came in for the first pours of the season," said Lori, who shares her husband's strong sense of community.

Both businesses are preparing for more visitors in 2012. Spotsylvania County tourism officials are working with local wineries, A. Smith Bowman, and Blue & Gray to develop a fermentation trail in the region—one more cooperative effort sure to please craft beer and whiskey fans alike. ♦

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