



The devil is in the brew

DEVILS BACKBONE BREWING COMPANY IN WESTERN VIRGINIA IS HELPING PROPAGATE THE CRAFT BREWING PHENOMENON THAT IS INCREASINGLY ENCHANTING MANY PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. THIS NEWLY OPENED, HOMEY OUTPOST IS JUST ONE STOP ON A GROWING BEER TRAIL THAT IS REVITALIZING AN ENTIRE COUNTY, BUT TO GET TO THE BEER YOU HAVE TO GET PAST THE BEAR

by Geoff Burpee

A few of the items Devils Backbone offers up to go with its craft beer, facing page. The front entrance, right, and the building, below.

THE FIRST THING THAT GREETES A VISITOR inside the hand-somely crafted entrance doors of Devils Backbone Brewing Company is a large and lovingly groomed (albeit safely stuffed and mounted) black bear. Over a pint inside it emerges that said bear – along with a few other choice examples of locally sourced taxidermy displayed on the premises – was taken down by the very man who designed and built the place, local architect and contractor Steve Crandall.

And while a fitting enough nod to the rolling landscape where the Devils Backbone sits at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western Virginia a 90-minute drive from Washington, D.C., a stuffed bear is not the first image that comes to mind when one thinks of the craft-brewing phenomenon.

There are several demographic drivers fueling the boom in microbrew consumption, a minor groundswell that has turned the handcrafted beer segment into one of the few bright spots of solid growth in the United States beer market that even in these difficult economic times continues to grow. The usual suspects include youthful drinkers seeking small-batch authenticity, anti-corporate No Logo college students, sustainability-minded slow foodies, stodgy urbane real-ale fans and the crowd looking to eat-drink only local fare that is in season. Middle-aged guys who hunt big game are not typically on that list. Then again, this is not your average, run-of-the-mill brewpub. This is the house that Steve built.

“It’s a pretty unique situation for a brewery,” said Jason Oliver, the Devils Backbone’s head brewer and a highly experienced journeyman. “Steve is one of the

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owners but he’s the builder too.”

Oliver, formerly in charge of brewery operations for the Gordon Biersch brewing restaurant chain in Virginia, Washington and Maryland, joined the project at the construction stage and can testify to the extraordinary job Crandall and his team have done.

“It’s pretty wild to watch it take shape,” said Oliver. “He just comes onto the site and starts improvising as he goes. As far as a place to brew and create and improve my craft, this place is like a shining beacon of light.”

The inspiration for the 5,700 square-foot microbrewery, local-seasonal restaurant and live bluegrass music venue, found its genesis on a ski vacation in Cortina in the Italian Alps. It was there while immersed in the snow-capped peaks of northeastern Italy that Crandall and a few close friends found themselves inspired by the locally crafted Weisse beer.

“The purity and the taste was something else,” said Crandall. “We found we could enjoy a few beers in the evening apres ski and then wake up the next day refreshed and ready to hit the slopes. Even before we headed back home, we were talking

about bringing some part of Italy back to Virginia. And the beer turned out to be it.”

Crandall and his partners decided to use their love of Northern Italian beer to pour something back into their home county. Though leaving the brewing duties to Oliver, Crandall brought to the project skills honed over decades as a designer and builder of immaculate stone and wood homes for well-to-do patrons seeking to meld comfortably into Virginia’s laidback country life.

The result is a structure of surpassing beauty and extraordinary quality, a true labor of love that despite an impressive scale presents a remarkably assured aesthetic fit in an otherwise gently rolling valley landscape of forest and rural farmland.

Since the initial soft launch in November, the Devils Backbone has been serving hand-crafted beer and hearty home-cooked, locally sourced meals to a steadily growing fan base. The idea, in addition to celebrating hand-crafted beer, was to create, if not a town hall experience exactly, then at the very least a place of agreeable size, comfort and authenticity that would serve as a meeting place for friends, family and all the people of Nelson County.

As the latest stop on a nascent beer trail with two other breweries in close proximity, Blue Mountain and Starr Hill, Devils Backbone also serves another important function



MICRO BREWS

Mandy Taylor Smack joined with partner Matt Nucci to

set up Blue Mountain Brewery and Hops Farm, Nelson county’s first microbrewery to ride the “drink local” bandwagon launched by the wine growers.

“Until prohibition, America probably had the greatest diversity of beer styles in the world,” said Taylor Smack, over a glass of his own Full Nelson Pale Ale (in homage to the county that inspired it). After prohibition, the country embarked on a near-total consolidation that has resulted in a beer landscape dominated by a handful of mass-produced brewing companies with increasingly uniform products.

“We don’t sponsor the Super Bowl,” said Smack’s fellow brewmaster Nucci. “We spend the money on getting our ingredients right.”

As if to verify Nucci’s statement, in the open field that sits outside the doors of the Blue Mountain brewery, two plots of land sit waiting for a spring planting of hops – more grist for the mill to lay claim to as much local sourcing as possible.

“We’re aiming to supply as much as 30 percent of our own hops,” said Nucci. “We kind of modeled the experience on a lot of the wineries we saw growing out here. The relationship with the wineries is important to us. We saw what they were doing and thought we could offer some of the same experiences, but with beer.”



After years of soaking up the Pacific Northwest micro-brew culture of Portland Oregon and then Denver, Colorado, Mark Thompson moved back to his native Virginia in 1999 to start up what has since evolved into the area’s most commercially successful micro-brewing operation, Starr Hill Brewery.

A decade later and operating on a scale that sees it stretching the bounds of the “micro” moniker, masterbrewer Thompson is adamant that the hand-crafted passion that launched his venture is very much intact.

“You can only sell what you love,” said Thompson.

Starr Hill’s sales doubled last year to 18,000 barrels and Thompson is forecasting that volume will double again in 2009 on the back of the brewery’s management of its brand, which it has closely allied with live music festivals and the grassroots, nomadic lifestyle that surrounds them.

Starr Hill favorites such as Northern Lights Indian Pale Ale and Dark Starr Stout get shipped in kegs and pallets to markets throughout Virginia and to pubs, restaurants and beer stores in surrounding states. The Dark Starr Stout is among the many Starr Hill brews to win multiple honors, taking a silver medal at the 2008 World Beer Cup and the gold at the 2005 Great American Beer Festival in Denver, a city Thompson calls the Napa Valley of micro-brewing.

“The wineries have led the way, but we’ve been really lucky to be in the right place at the right time,” said Thompson.

Devils Backbone is not only about the locally crafted beers, you will also find barbecued meat and fresh apple-onion relish.



– lending critical mass to the area’s aspirations as a draw for tourists interested in learning more about and enjoying locally brewed beer. South Street, an older, more established niche brewery in nearby Charlottesville, is another likely candidate to join what the local tourism board has dubbed “Red, White & Brew,” a combination winery and brewery trail to attract the coveted food & beverage tourism dollar.

The “Red, White” part refers to the dozen or so vineyards in the area. Less conventional, but every bit as fun for those along for the ride is the “Brew” element.

According to local lore, the first Virginian brewmaster was none other than Thomas Jefferson himself. The founding father and author of the Declaration of Independence reportedly grew hops not far from Nelson County at his Monticello estate, where he brewed cider and beer for his guests.

The first stop on the “Red, White and Brew” trail coming from Washington would be a pint or two at Charlottesville’s South Street, before heading into the country for more refreshment and a brewing lecture tour from Mark Thompson at his Starr Hill brewery in Crozet. Having recently penned a distri-

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bution deal with Anheuser-Busch (no word yet on any impact from the AmBev buyout), Starr Hill is the least rustic port of call.

From there, it is a short drive up towards the mountains to Afton and the Blue Mountain Brewery. A panoramic mountain view from the outside patio is the ideal setting for a glass of Full Nelson Pale Ale or to indulge in some of the chewier, more experimental seasonals. The Cascade hops cultivated on a couple of broad swathes on the brewery

premises are used in several Blue Mountain beers and serve as a fitting landscaping choice to compliment the microbrewery experience.

From Afton, it is a 20-minute drive to Devils Backbone, where the cathedral to all things microbrew awaits. Choose your evening right and you can take a whirl with locals as they unwind to some authentic live bluegrass or Delta blues.

On a recent visit to Devils Backbone, the warm strains of traditional bluegrass picking emanate throughout the pub from a local outfit called the Piney River Boys. Chris Trotter, the general manager at Devils Backbone, arrived with a long narrow plate filled with a troika of juicy Buffalo Sliders (small, three-bite burgers of Buffalo meat) and some local apple-onion relish. This is followed by a succulently smoky plate of saucy barbecued babyback ribs, the perfect compliment for some of Oliver’s recent cre-

ations. Other standout fare includes three steaks, including a daunting 18-ounce bone-in grilled ribeye served with sweet potato fries and roasted poblano relish, plus some Tex-Mex influenced chicken dishes and a grilled salmon.

Trotter relocated back to Virginia to manage the Devils Backbone start-up after working similar jobs at wineries in Sonoma, California. He and head chef Shawn Goodwin are in the process of developing a menu that compliments Oliver's beer, as well as a solid list of local, regional and otherwise mostly new world wines.

"We've been working closely with the staff to build our knowledge about how to pair dishes with Jason's beers, really trying to deliver a unique experience," said Trotter. "And we're getting more confident about it, maybe pairing our really rich chocolate torte with a dark porter. This is relatively new to people but they've been really receptive to the idea."

The Devils Backbone takes its name from an alternate moniker for the Blue

Hills that serve as its backdrop. The pedantic note the lack of a possessive apostrophe in "Devils," something Crandall explains as a PR effort not to burden the establishment – and its primary product – with too many ungodly associations so near the bible belt.

With the first beers having achieved suitably drinkable age only a week earlier, the entire place fizzed with start-up energy during the December visit.

Oliver has crafted or selected everything about the beer-drinking experience, from every nuance of the brewing ingredients and process down to the pint glasses in which the fruits of his labors are served. A self-avowed specialist of the German-Austrian brewing heritage, he adheres to the strict principles of his craft, pushing the boundaries in nuanced adjustments to traditional recipes, but avoiding the more radical departures

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**WINE
TOURISM**

After moving to Virginia in the mid-1990s, New Orleans native Maureen

Corum took the job as director of Nelson County's Economic Development and Tourism in 2002. She has since acted on a very specific mandate from the county to attract new businesses to Nelson. She eschews straightforward industrial development in favor of the kind of genteel, holistic and sustainable agro-tourism familiar to many Europeans.

And just as in Europe, that meant wine. In roughly a decade since the first vines were planted, the area's gentle climate, elevation (about 1,300 feet above sea level in the valley where the Devils Backbone lies), rolling hills and fertile soils have proven a boon for vintners with the number of producing wineries in the 471 square-mile county growing into double digits from zero just a dozen years ago. State-wide, Virginia had 134 wineries posting retail sales of about \$70 million in 2007, according to the State's wine marketing office.

A stand-out in terms of scenery, atmosphere as well as the vintages sampled is Veritas Vineyard & Winery, located in a stunning valley just across the county line in neighboring Afton. Andrew and Patricia Hodson opened Veritas in 2002 and have already spawned a second-generation winemaker, with daughter Emily Pelton presiding over the output that includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Viognier, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and even some sparkling wines.

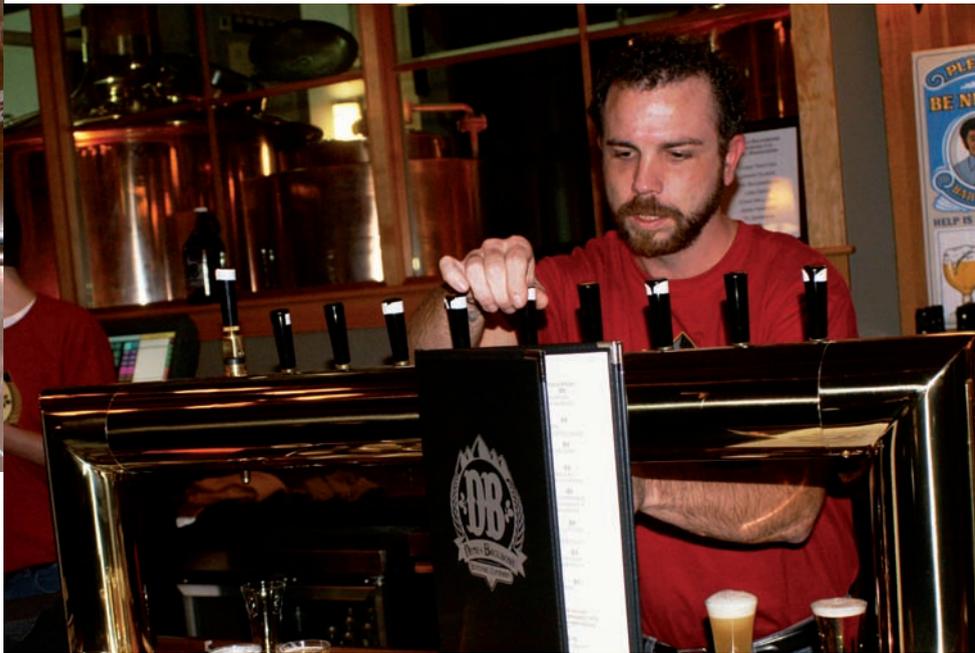
Corum said the county made a conscious decision, after conducting surveys of local residents, to pursue food and wine tourism because of the unique merits of its agricultural scene. The research revealed that residents were traveling out of county to work jobs in neighboring areas, a way of life they preferred to the prospect of attracting industrial jobs.

"The new, strongly growing winery businesses built by these entrepreneurs have created dozens of jobs for the county," said Corum. "It's also the kind of work that matters. It's keeping people in the county who would have otherwise left looking for work."





It starts like this, left, before getting served up like this, below.



that define the “extreme brewing” practices at Delaware’s well-publicized Dogfish Head, where the ultra-hopped 120-minute Indian Pale Ale packs 20 percent alcohol by volume.

A popular entry point to the Devils Backbone beer list is a tasting menu, with the pint broken down into a series of 2-ounce shot glasses that run the gamut from the Gold Leaf Lager (a Bavarian-style Helles lager) to a thick, dark nectar of a porter the color of crude oil, that slips across the palate like a velvety, alcoholic espresso.

In between, there are a couple of nut-brown real ales, Trotter described the most popular, the Ale of Fergus, as

attracting a “cultish following.” Brewmaster Oliver noted that the most recent batch was gone in less than two weeks.

This is encouraging for a drinking public that some feared may have an aversion to more adventurous tastes.

“Strong and brown has done really well for us,” said Oliver. “Right now we’ve got a Belgian-style Tripel, an Imperial Stout and a Bock on tap, and the darker beers are all doing well.”

There is also an intensely hoppy and potent India Pale Ale, and the Wintergreen Weisse, an extraordinarily accomplished nod to the style that started it all back in Cortina. This Bavarian-style Hefeweizen is proving a crowd favorite, with its cloudy parchment hue and delicious, fragrant finish.

The Devils Backbone consists of a large central barn-like structure flanked by two wings. Like all the best brewpubs, the guts of the brewing process are open for all to see. Patrons who belly up to the bar can gaze through a large bank of windows at the brew kettles complete with decorative copper funnels that soar, Willy Wonka-like, 50 feet to the slanted roof above.

In the main space, ceilings rise in three stages, with successive 12-foot frames of massive open-grain hardwood rafters. Two cloisters flank the main barroom, with room for tables and an intimate stage setup on the left, and another room on the right full of tables and booths that leads to a large stone fireplace with a towering chimney.

Doors lead out from the left wing onto a deck area, and on the other to an outdoor fire pit and a small pond.

A Baltimore native with an Institute of Brewing & Distilling degree and a decade of brewing experience, Oliver presides over his ingredients and jerry-rigged set-up (all the equipment was purchased from a bankrupt brewer in Japan) like a master hit maker in a mixing booth. The system, said Oliver, is replete with Japanese characters on its various temperature gauges and pressure indicators.

“It’s the best I’ve ever worked on,” said Oliver. “We’re aiming for total sustainability in everything we do. The leftover malt after it comes out of the kettle goes straight to a local farmer for his cows, they love it. He sends us steaks for the kitchen.”

