

A Beer Renaissance in Wine Country

Evan Williams



Growing Hops, Brewing Beer, and Cultivating a Craft

When brewmaster Taylor Smack and his wife, Mandi, first started planning a new brewpub several years ago, they couldn't have imagined how much thirst there was for locally made craft beer in the Piedmont. Now, celebrating its one-year anniversary, Afton's Blue Mountain Brewery and Hop Farm can barely keep up with Virginia's insatiable demand.

A New Vision

Smack, originally from Lynchburg, had his first experience with homebrewing in the late 1990s, and was soon volunteering at Charlottesville's South Street Brewery. After attending the world-renowned Seibel Institute and working as a brewmaster for Goose Island Beer's Chicago brewpubs, he returned to the Piedmont with his wife. When his friend at South Street needed help at the brewery, Smack was happy to step in and quickly became the full-time

brewer. During his years there, he produced a bevy of award-winning brews and eventually gained a reputation as one of the areas foremost craft brewers. But, says Smack, "while they were great bosses, I really just hit the glass ceiling, and . . . I wanted to do something different."

What that meant was a new brewpub business model. In a region known for its sprawling vineyards, Blue Mountain carved a niche using the "destination" model of Virginia's wineries. The Smacks moved out of the urban environment to the scenic Afton "wine trail," built a 3,000-barrel-capacity brewery with a welcoming brewpub atmosphere, and even planted their own hop vines. Now at home in the Virginia countryside, the Smacks and longtime friend (and now business partner) Matt Nucci are taking the traditional idea of the city brewpub and turning it on its head. Not only is the site now a social watering post for locals, but it has also become what it had set out to be: a destination brewery, like the neighboring wineries. "Sure, we get our locals every day, but we're just inundated with tourists," Smack says.

A Quick Note on the Brewing Process

At its core, beer is made up of four main ingredients: water, barley, hops, and yeast. Specialty "malted" barley is steeped in warm water at specific temperatures, which extracts

mainly sugar and flavors from the grain. This sweet liquid, wort (pronounced "wert"), is boiled for an hour. Hops are added at specific times during this boil. (The earlier they're added, the more bitterness and preservative qualities they impart; the later in the boil they are added, the more flavor and aroma is extracted.) Lastly, the wort is cooled and yeast is added. Over the course of 1 to 2 weeks, these single-celled organisms turn the sugar into alcohol—and beer is born!

The Connection with the Place

When it comes to this brewing process, Blue Mountain's connection with the land is obvious. "We all think of cool brewpubs downtown, and [with] most of them, you just pull city water," Smack says. But in Afton, Blue Mountain has what Smack calls an "unbelievable, untapped, protected watershed" as the brewing water source. This pristine water gives him the opportunity to make better beer than he ever could in the city. In fact, 95 percent of beer is water, so the quality of brewing water is extremely important. While wine often gets credit for its expression of terroir, Blue Mountain's water is their terroir. Close attention is also paid to the water they return. "We put in an aerobic treatment system for our wastewater, which we didn't have to do," he says.

The Smacks' connection to their soil can also be seen (or rather, tasted) with their use of home-grown hops. Beer has long been a product of many hands: a brewer buys his grain and hops from others and uses them as a baker or a chef would. And while the Smacks still purchase their grain and most of their hops from others, Blue Mountain's hop farm allows them to serve their flagship Full Nelson Pale Ale on the same property where its hops were grown—a feat few brewers can claim.

PHOTOS BY BRAD DAY



A Beer Renaissance

As a nation of immigrants, the United States should, by all accounts, be the "beer melting pot" of the world. Few realize, however, just how much damage prohibition caused in the beer market. After the 18th Amendment was repealed, the only acts left standing were the huge industrial brewers. Over the next half century, Americans came to almost exclusively associate "beer" with their bland lagers. Then, in the 1970s, Americans finally began to seek out artisanal beer again, and a renaissance was started. Since then, the number of small craft brewers in the U.S. has exploded.

As a packaging brewery, Blue Mountain also sends its kegs and bottles across central Virginia, but Smack laments not being able to keep up with demand. While the brewery could produce 3,000 barrels per year, Blue Mountain has only been able to operate at half that capacity. "We're increasing our output by 50 percent in 2009, though," he says, signaling a seemingly endless thirst for local, artisanal beer in the Piedmont. The beer culture in America is rapidly shifting toward diverse, hand-crafted beer, and the region finds itself with an opportunity for growth in craft beer. It's a scenario that was implausible just a few decades ago, but craft brewing has a bright future ahead.

"This is the golden age," says Taylor. As you waded through the weekend crowds at Blue Mountain Brewery, those words ring especially true.

Evan Williams also conducts our blind tastings (page 60).

Pairings

The light, refreshing **Rockfish Wheat** is perfect with grilled seafood and will even cut through rich sauces such as béchamel.

The rich, malty **Lights Out** holiday ale pairs well with winter stews, such as beef and venison, or heavy French dishes like beef bourguignon.

The hoppy **Full Nelson Pale Ale** will complement the usual suspects like pizza, but it is versatile enough to handle spicy styles like Thai or Indian.

Blue Mountain Brewery and Hop Farm

(540) 456-8020

www.bluemountainbrewery.com

Blue Mountain Brewery's offerings are on tap at over two dozen locations in the Piedmont, including Capital Ale House, Mellow Mushroom, Beer Run, Blue Moon Diner, and Farmington and Keswick clubs. Bottled beer can be found at over 30 retailers, including Market Street Wine Shop, Wine Warehouse, Whole Foods, and Beer Run.

Jefferson
VINEYARDS

MASTER CLASS
in Red Wine Blending
MAY 2 & MAY 9

Join us for the ultimate
winery experience.

Seminar session with winemaker Andy Reagan gives insight into the art and science of blending red Bordeaux varietals into your own Meritage. Graduated cylinders, calculators, pens and paper provided - your palate and imagination complete the toolkit. All wines drawn from barrel.

Reservations are required and space is limited.
\$50 per person includes gourmet buffet.

To reserve, call (800) 272-3042



Located between Monticello and Ash Lawn on Thomas Jefferson's original 1774 vineyard sites.
Open 9am to 5pm daily for tours and tastings.

WWW.JEFFERSONVINEYARDS.COM