

What's Brewing

In a state known for wine,
inventive beer makers and distillers
diversify the area's liquid assets



BY JENNIFER BARGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN TIMMES





BECKY AND SCOTT HARRIS OFFERING TASTINGS AT CATOCTIN CREEK DISTILLERY; (FACING PAGE) A BEER FLIGHT AT HERITAGE; (PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT) BELLYING UP TO THE HERITAGE BAR; SUDS AT MAD FOX



ON A CHILLY SUNDAY, there's a blazing fire pit going outside Purcellville, Virginia's Old 690 Brewing Company. But staffers serve the beers mostly crisp and cold inside the rustic-chic tasting room, where a corrugated metal bar and high tables made from old oil drums set the scene for well-balanced craft suds like Angry Neighbor Pale Ale. "We're aiming for fun to brew and fun to drink," says co-owner Ronda Powell, overseeing a crowd of beer buffs—some with kids or dogs in tow—testing out eight-draft samples.

A similar sense of playful whimsy meshed with serious invention seems to be powering a craft spirits deluge in a state more traditionally known for wine production. Dozens of breweries and distilleries have opened in the last few years, many in the Northern Virginia counties of Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William. Most offer tastings and tours, making for merry exploration of the area's history, landscape and drinking culture, especially if you hire a driver.

Why the sudden uptick? Credit residents' growing passion for local products and the state's rapidly changing alcohol legislation. A 2012 "pint law" allows beer makers to serve their suds on site, while a 2014 act permits so-called "farm breweries" to grow hops, produce and pour in one spot.

"Virginia has always been a pro-business state. [Legislators] really encouraged the wine industry, and beer is just following suit," says beer historian Garrett Peck, author of "Capital Beer: A Heady History of Brewing in Washington, D.C." He adds, "The thing about beer—it's much easier to make, and the turnaround time is a few weeks, not a year."

For a NoVa spirits crawl, you might want to focus on one region—say Loudoun County, with its blend of breweries on farms and in historic villages, or Prince William County, where upstarts operate out of warehouses and strip malls. Recipes range from traditional and well balanced to highly experimental.

"There are now hops farms near Richmond and a hops-processing plant in Lucketts," says Kory Mohr, founder of The Virginia Beer Trail (vabeertrail.net). "It's interesting to see how the state is running with this."

FAIRFAX COUNTY

The Falstaffian share of the urban county's breweries ferment near Ashburn, but Alexandria's Port City is worth a detour. The city's first brewery since Prohibition opens its tasting room daily and on weekends offers live music and guided tours that include peeks at its patented "secret weapon": the Hopzooka.

"That tank allows us to shoot hops into the fermenting beer without oxygen. It improves the beer and its shelf life," says founder (and ex-wine marketer) Bill Butcher. Brews range from pale ales to porters, with standouts including Optimal Wit, a Belgian-style white.

Falls Church's Mad Fox preps its beers on site in 15 stainless steel barrels visible from a perch at the bar. With a strong showing of IPAs, Mad Fox also operates a gastropub dishing up booze-friendly chow like "frickles" (deep-fried pickles) and thin-crust pizzas with unusual toppings like Sriracha garlic puree.

Further west in Ashburn, multiple breweries cluster in warehouse-type digs. Lost Rhino specializes in West Coast-style ales and lagers served in a tasting room decorated with its own product: beer cans in wooden palettes stacked to the ceiling. There's live music on weekends, too. Also close by: Old Ox, home to both European styles and experimental brews, and the new Ocelot Brewing Company, where wall murals riff on iconic rock songs.

At the county's distillery, experimentation takes a back seat to historical accuracy. Near George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, a faithful recreation of his 1771 stone enterprise opens for tours April through October. Using 18th-century methods, breeches-wearing staff grind corn at the gristmill and boil mash at the adjacent distillery. The resulting small-batch rye whiskey sells out quickly.

LOUDOUN COUNTY

More than 30 wineries dot the rolling hills of Loudoun County. But they're seeing stiff drink competition from breweries and distilleries, some down twisty country roads (like Old 690, above) and others in converted warehouses.

The wildest of the bunch? Adroit Theory, a self-billed "nano brewery" where a rotating list of very small-batch beers might include a barley wine or a chili-spiked saison. "Our brewer, Greg Skotzko, has an adventurous palate and a history of traveling abroad," says owner Mark Osborne.

Neighboring outfits include the Buddha-themed Belly Love, a taproom-brewpub where cleverly named suds—Bitter X IPA, Eye of Jupiter Oatmeal Stout—headline lounge-like digs with comfy sofas and Asian motifs.

In tiny downtown Purcellville, Scott and Becky Harris converted a 1921 Buick dealership into an industrial-elegant home for their Catoctin Creek Distilling Company. The gleaming copper stills ("Big Boy" and "Barney") are visible from the tasting room, where a U-shaped bar offers samples of gin, rye and Mosby's Spirit—a moonshine-like liquor that staffer Alexa Severo says "makes a great vodka substitute."

PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

Known for Civil War sites, historic towns and off-price shopping, this exurban county now claims beer buzz, too. New breweries here lean toward tiny and upstart, which means you might get to stir a pot of brewing hops or chat with a passionate brew master.

At Gainesville's quirky, friendly Tin Cannon, sidle up to the little copper-topped bar for tastes that veer from addictive (Crazy Meg Stout, with an alluring nutmeg flavor) to oddball (Peanut Butter Porter). In a nearby strip mall, BadWolf is even smaller, but there's big appeal to brews like the straw-hued Honey Kölsch and an old-fashioned popcorn machine. (At press time, a second, larger location was expected to open soon.)

The beauty queen of the bunch, Heritage fills a hangar-like warehouse that could star in a country music video. Think soaring ceilings, an oversized mural of a 1940s pinup girl and a mammoth U.S. flag. The veteran-owned spot, which uses only American ingredients, gives its brews patriotic names like American Expedition and Revolution, the latter perhaps an apt description of northern Virginia's current spirits culture. We bet the founding fathers would raise a glass.



WHERE AND WHAT TO DRINK

BREWERIES

ADROIT THEORY

404 Browning Ct.,
Unit C, Purcellville
703.722.3144
adroit-theory.com
Try: The Devil Made Me

BADWOLF

9776 Center St.,
Manassas
571.208.1064
badwolfbrewing
company.com
Try: Honey Kölsch

BELLY LOVE

725 E. Main St.,
Purcellville
540.441.3159
bellylovebrewing.com
*Try: Eye of Jupiter
Oatmeal Stout*

HERITAGE

9436 Center Point Ln.,
Manassas
571.358.8463
heritagebrewing.com
*Try: American Expedition
Honey Ginger Wheat Ale*

LOST RHINO

21730 Red Rum Dr.,
Suite 142, Ashburn
571.291.2083
lostrhino.com
Try: Face Plant IPA

MAD FOX

444 W. Broad St.,
Falls Church
703.942.6840
madfoxbrewing.com
*Try: Gridlock India
Pale Lager*

OCELOT

23600 Overland Dr.,
Sterling
703.474.3050

ocelotbrewing.com

Try: Any IPA

OLD 690

15670 Ashbury Church
Rd., Purcellville
540.668.7023
old690.com
*Try: Stoner Point
Smoked Beer*

OLD OX

44652 Guildford Dr.,
Ashburn
703.729.8375
oldoxbrewery.com
Try: Kristin's Passion

PORT CITY

3950 Wheeler Ave.,
Alexandria
703.797.2739
portcitybrewing.com
Try: Optimal Wit

TIN CANNON

7679 Limestone Dr.
#130, Gainesville
571.248.0489
tincannonbrewing.com
Try: Crazy Meg Stout

DISTILLERIES

CATOCTIN CREEK

120 W. Main St.,
Purcellville
540.751.8404
catoctincreekdistilling.com
Try: Roundstone Rye

MOUNT VERNON

5513 Mt. Vernon
Memorial Hwy.,
Alexandria
703.780.3383
mountvernon.org
Try: G.W.'s Original Recipe

*For bus tours,
see restonlimo.com.*