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MILESTONES

The first six-year-old rye is released at Virginia's Catoctin Creek

WRITTEN BY MAGGIE KIMBERL

L 5 years ago, the notion of starting a distillery was crazy. All the distilling knowledge was concentrated in a small region of the United States, and sourcing materials and equipment wasn't easy. But for federal government employee Scott Harris and chemical engineer Becky Harris, the founders of Catoctin Creek, it was challenge accepted, and now they have reached a major milestone: Catoctin Creek's first six-year-old bottled-in-bond rye whiskey.

"We focus on making Virginia rye whiskey," explains Scott Harris. "Rye whiskey is a tradition that goes back in Virginia to 1607, to Jamestown, the first settlers in Virginia. It's Virginia's native spirit, and that's what we want to make. That's why we focus on rye whiskey almost exclusively."

Getting started was daunting, but the HARRISES were up to the challenge.

"There were two things," Harris recalls. "I had a great love of whiskey after working in government for 20 years. And then my wife, Becky, being a chemical engineer, I had very good confidence that she could make

whiskey. She also had confidence that she could do it. You know, the difficulties that lay in this business really didn't lay in the area of making the product. They continue to this day to be in the area of distribution and sales. That's the hardest part of this business, I think."

From the beginning, Catoctin Creek laid down 30-gallon barrels. Many craft distilleries made the choice to use smaller than the typical 53-gallon barrels for a number of reasons. First, their distillation capacity would often make it difficult to fill a 53-gallon barrel in a timely manner. Some distilleries only had the capacity to make about one barrel of whiskey a week, and putting them into smaller barrels meant the aging process could begin sooner. Second, there was a theory early on that smaller barrels meant more contact with the wood and would therefore mature whiskey faster. Some distilleries were using barrels as small as five to 10 gallons. The 30-gallon barrel is a sweet spot for craft producers for a variety of reasons.

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“The backstory on the barrels is we started at 30-gallon barrels because when it was just Becky and me, that was the biggest barrel that she could push and move around herself,” Harris explains. “That’s kind of why we chose it, but we also liked the way that flavor impacted the whiskey with the aging that we wanted. But the angel share for the 30-gallon barrel is atrocious. For the four-year-old Rabble Rouser Rye product, in the early days, we were seeing angel’s share on a 30-gallon barrel of about 30 per cent. And that is just devastating — 30 gallons goes in, 20 gallons come out.”

But still, the flavor impact of the 30-gallon barrels is favorable, given the maturation climate in the Virginia foothills. While some products have started going into 53-gallon barrels, not all products will.

“With the Roundstone Rye product line, the 30-gallon barrel is a really integral part of that flavor profile. So that’s something that we’re not going to change. But this is actually the first release of the Rabble Rouser Rye product line that is in 53-gallon barrels, and that is Becky’s preferred barrel size now for the Rabble Rouser product line.”

When asked why it took 15 years to

release a six-year-old product, Harris explained that one, Catoctin Creek has released a 10 Years Old XO Brandy, and two, that those early barrels of rye whiskey were the distillery’s cash cow and every drop had to be sold in order to keep it going.

“Becky, oftentimes without my knowledge or consent, squirrels away some of this stuff,” Harris jokes. “That’s when we get some of this six-year-old Rabble Rouser, because she had decided that she was gonna sock a portion of it away. She’s been doing that now for the past number of years. In years past, Rabble Rouser was generally four years old, so this is some that she had let sit even longer. That’s the reason why this is some of the first old whiskey that you’ve been seeing from us.”

All the whiskey that Catoctin Creek makes is 100 per cent rye. Barrels are charred to a level three and are made of white oak from both Virginia and Minnesota. There is no climate control employed in Catoctin Creek’s warehouses, and while they are at about 300ft above sea level, there is not much difference in the climate compared with a rickhouse in Kentucky.

Learn more at catoctincreekdistilling.com. ■



PREVIOUS PAGES: A bottle of Catoctin Creek rye
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