

Charleston Mercury

THE PAPERZINE WITH A COSMOPOLITAN ATTITUDE

ONE DOLLAR

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By Robert Salvo

Some people spend their entire lives looking for a calling, a higher purpose. They ponder the stars; they pore over the works of philosophers and mystics ...

Perhaps they should have been staring at their beer.

It worked for Georgia Dunn Belk, creator of Islander Ginger Beer. Admittedly, for some folks ginger beer is merely a mixer for the occasional Dark-and-Stormy or Moscow Mule. For Georgia — who resides in the Carolinas but has centuries-deep family ties to the Caribbean — finely crafted ginger beer is a passion, a personal mission, really.

She sums it up thusly: “I’m trying to carry on family and community culture and traditions that we are one generation away from losing.”

Like any worthwhile preservation project, it’s been hard work. Pondering her memories of life in the Turks and Caicos, witnessing the foodways of the region vanish beneath a wave of imported processed products — she was spurred to action. Though a number Caribbean dishes are disappearing from tables, she concluded the best approach would be pursuit of a singular excellence: “I’m going to do one thing — I’m going to do ginger beer,” she states.

The Turks and Caicos does not suffer from the Byzantine regulations of the American alcohol industry. Belk was free to gather up her fresh fruit, spices and other ingredients, prepare a few cases at a time of product, fire up a diesel generator to supply her electrical needs, then load the brew into the back of her SUV and head out selling. Down in the islands, there were no licensing or reporting requirements, no network of distributors to worry about — just payment in cash from the barkeeps, then off to make another batch.

It sounds idyllic, until you start thinking about how pricey all that diesel fuel is, or how all fresh water (a somewhat important ingredient for beer) in the Turks and Caicos comes from sources either intermittent — rain — or expensive — desalination.

The Carolina connection

So Georgia found herself chatting with some folks from another family with a noteworthy Caribbean heritage — the Bacardis. Though their family name may be synonymous with rum, their line of Hatuey Beer was once Cuba’s favorite, selling 12 million cases a year in the late 1950s. When it was revived as a premium craft beer about a decade ago, they sought the perfect spot to make the Cuban classic and found it — right here in South Carolina. Today it’s made at the Thomas Creek Brewery of Greenville, picked largely for access to the clean and pure water of the 26,000 acre Greenville Watershed.

So when it came time for Belk’s Islander beer to come to the mainland, she too chose S.C.’s Thomas Creek Brewery. That didn’t mean she stepped back from the process: Islander still sources its own ingredients, owns its own equipment and, most importantly, does its own quality assurance. It’s important for both for the palette and for preservation — ginger beer “defined the culture of the Caribbean, just as wine did for the French,” and Belk takes her product as seriously as any highly-decorated winemaker would theirs.

History and geography

It’s a testimony to ginger beer’s power to connect people across time and space. Long before grain-based beverages of hops and barley made their way here, the fermented ancestors of ginger beer were being consumed by indigenous people throughout the Americas. For Belk, it’s a family matter: Her ancestor Thomas Harriott was sent to North America by Queen Elizabeth I in 1585 to prepare the path forward for other voyagers and settlers to follow. A scientist, he was charged not only with giving astronomical guidance to the voyage, but with collecting samples of the native flora and fauna. All the ingredients needed to make ginger beer were collected as part of his mission.

He was an interesting figure — a polymath, the first person to draw the moon from observations made by telescope, a brilliant mathematician (his legacy hindered for his tendency not to publish his



work) and his study of the Algonquin language included devising a phonetic alphabet to transcribe the natives’ words — giving us a rich legacy of place names in the Virginia Tidewater that exists to this day.

His son was another intriguing Harriott, making his way to the Bermuda colony rather than Jamestown. Bermuda’s topsoil was rich but thin, offering one season of fantastic tobacco output for English investors, then years of disappointment to follow. Subjected to taxes based on what Englishmen back home thought they should be producing, rather than their actual crop yield, the early Bermudans were squeezed dry. The younger Harriott would not have it and became a very vocal tax protester — eventually losing his ear as part of the punishment for his rebellion.

Soon the family got out of the farming business and moved into shipbuilding and trade. After 1790, they began the lucrative business of salt harvesting, heading to the dry, flat Turks and Caicos to collect the white gold. Having almost no organic impurities, their product was so popular that to counterfeit Turks and Caicos salt was a felony; George Washington requested it specifically to season and preserve the food that nourished Continental soldiers through the infamous winter at Valley Forge.

As for ginger beer, its popularity peaked in the 19th century: At its height, there were thousands of ginger beer breweries across Britain, the United States and Canada. But a change in British tax codes in the 1850s altered consumers relationship with the sweet and spicy potable; soon it would be become more of a regional specialty, best known elsewhere simply as a mixer for harder stuff.

Back to warmer climes and modern times: Eventually Belk’s family sold their salt interests — though they are still in use today, now owned by Morton’s, one of the largest producers of salt in the world. The Harriott descendants carried on island life much as usual though Belk’s grandmother’s generation. This generation is who she personally recalls when talking about the islander’s distinct way of life, with a food culture more connected to the Caribbean than to the continental U.S.

She’s not the only one who remembers such a

time, either. Ginger beer connects the tropics in a unique way, with every island — sometimes every household — having their own unique twists on making the brew. Belk recalls chatting with a taxi driver in New York who was a recent Haitian immigrant; within no time, they were swapping ginger beer recipes and warmly recalling family meals in days gone by.

Lemonade, too

And while Georgia Belk started out to “do one thing and do it well,” her company has crafted another delicious beverage, perfect for the summer sun: Harriott’s Hard Lemonade. Bearing the name of her aforementioned ancestors, the beverage was the byproduct of quality control work with the ginger beer.

“Citrus has the greatest variability. It’s like wine ... every vintage is different,” she notes; while testing a batch of citrus and fermented sugar cane inadvertently made for an attention-grabbing hard lemonade. While there are plenty of fruity hard seltzers currently on the market, Harriott’s stands out — not just for its heritage, but for its clean, all-natural construction.

Indeed, the fully gluten-free drink is, like Islander, available at some health food stores because of the purity of its ingredients. If you’re looking for her beverages in the Charleston area, she suggests Harris Teeter — both beverages can be found in every one of their stores from Washington, D.C. to the Lowcountry.

They’re a perfect way to raise a refreshing glass to the important work of preservation. As Belk states of those who came before us, “they made great sacrifices so that we can enjoy this wonderful life ... Please, do your part to collect information and, in some way, honor and respect those that came before us. And do so with gratitude.” A preservation effort that upholds history and deliciously slakes a summertime thirst — that’s something almost anyone could be grateful to swallow.

Those with questions, or just on the hunt for the best place to find a pack of ginger beer or hard lemonade to call their own, are encouraged to reach out to Georgia Belk directly at (704) 451-8400.