



Shaun Harris, Tim White and TJ Thomas.



BEER FRONTIER

On Allison Hill, three men are on track to open PA's first black-owned craft brewery.

BY LIZZY HARDISON

Shaun Harris was watching TV in his Harrisburg home when he caught an episode of “Moonshiners,” a show about illegal whiskey production in the Appalachian Mountains. As he witnessed scofflaws in rural Virginia distill liquor from giant drums of hog feed, Harris thought to himself, “You can do that?”

As it turns out, you can't. A quick Google search told Harris that brewing liquor in America is illegal without a license. Brewing beer, on the other hand, is fair game. Harris promptly bought a simple home-brewing kit, made his first batch of beer and “was immediately blown away.”

Harris roped his friends JT Thomas and Tim White into joining him for a daylong home-brew session. They brought one of their first kegs to a summer barbeque, where they offered it to a dozen friends with a disclaimer—they didn't know how it would taste.

“Six gallons were gone in like, 20 minutes,” said Thomas. “People had one and wanted another and another and another.”

Harris describes that barbeque as a light-bulb moment. He didn't know yet what craft beer was, but he did know that the ingredients and production that went into his keg didn't cost much.

“Where we're from, you try to monetize everything—it's called being a hustler,” Harris said. “We thought, we can do something here.”

That was four years ago. Since then, Harris, White and Thomas started making beer as the Harris Family Brewery, and they just secured a location for a taproom on 13th and Market Streets, in South Allison Hill. They still need to obtain a brewer's license and retrofit the empty space with brewing equipment and seating, but they're hoping to sell the first beers over their 10-seat bar in early 2019.

When it opens, Harris Family Brewery will be the first craft brewery in Allison Hill and likely the first black-owned brewery in Pennsylvania. Harris hopes that the business will inject new life into its neighborhood and broaden Harrisburg's craft beer scene beyond its downtown and Midtown epicenter.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The guys at Harris Family Brewing don't just see their new business venture as a way to do what they love—it's also an opportunity to bring a new base of consumers into a lucrative market.

Craft beer sales in the United States topped \$26 billion last year and account for 13 percent of the country's total beer industry. But African Americans, who make up 14 percent of the country's total population, only consumed 4 percent of its craft beer in 2014, according to a Nielsen study.

Mike Potter is the editor of Black Brew Culture, a Pittsburgh-based online magazine dedicated to advancing African Americans in the craft beer industry. Potter said that people of color haven't traditionally been exposed to craft beer, in part because the industry hasn't invested in marketing to minority customers.

Craft beer consumption among blacks is on the rise, but Potter said that fewer people of color enter the industry as brewers and brewery owners.

“We’re getting to a point where there are more and more of people of color in craft beer, but they’re not getting the same amount of exposure due to lack of resources,” Potter said. “We’re playing a bit of catch up.”

Since national brewer associations don’t track the demographics of brewery owners, Black Brew Culture keeps its own tally. Potter estimates that people of color own roughly 50 of the country’s 2,800 craft breweries, and he’s certain that Harris Family Brewery will be the first in Pennsylvania.

Harris says he’s used to being one of the only black people at craft beer tastings and breweries. To him, that’s not a problem so much as a sign of untapped potential. Shortly after they brewed their first successful batch of beer, White pointed out to Harris that they would have a niche market for their product.

“I thought, ‘You’re telling me that we have a whole market that doesn’t know there’s a product out there that is this big?’” Harris said. “I say, ‘Let’s open that market up.’”

To that end, their brewery location will be key. Though the brewers initially had their eyes on property in Steelton, serendipity led them to their spot above a laundromat at 13th and Market. It’s snug, but Harris said they hope to open “a nano-brewery in the truest sense,” meaning that all of the small-batch beer they produce will be sold on site. The space is just big enough to accommodate their current home-brew set up and a 10-seat bar. They don’t plan to serve any food, but do anticipate a busy carryout business once they start selling bottles and cans.

Harris Family Brewing will start small, but its proprietors are already charting plans for growth. They’ll start with an off-site canning facility once the taproom on Market Street takes off. They then hope to distribute their beer across the state and grow their presence through festivals and industry expos. They’ve already sampled their beers during Harrisburg Beer Week and also held a pop-up tasting in Strawberry Square with local event organizer and promoter Sara Bozich.

They’ll also bring kegs to Steelton Community Day on July 23 and will hit the road for the Aug. 11 FreshFest, a black brewing festival in Pittsburgh hosted by Black Brew Culture.

STRANGEST INDUSTRY

If you already own a brewery in Harrisburg, it could be easy to see a new one as competition. But that’s not the case for Brandalynn Armstrong, co-owner of Zeroday Brewing Co. on Reily Street. Armstrong, who’s also on the board of the PA Brewers Association, thinks that expanding the craft beer market into a new neighborhood can only help Harrisburg’s existing breweries.

“Bridging neighborhoods is incredibly important, as long as it’s done through responsible development,” Armstrong said. “And what better way than using craft beer to link our neighborhoods together?”

She and Harris also think that each individual brewery in the city benefits from customers having more options. Harris hopes that Harris Family Brewery will introduce many of its customers to craft beer, encouraging them to “expand their palates” and try other beers in the city.

Harris, who works full-time in corporate IT when he’s not brewing beer, called craft beer “the strangest industry you ever saw—it’s more like kids on a playground than corporate America.”

He’s been shocked by his company’s warm welcome into the local brewers’ network, which he described as more collaborative than cutthroat. Harris Family and Zeroday recently held a joint brew day to develop a collaboration beer, which they’ll debut on July 3 during a screening of “Poured in PA,” a documentary about the statewide craft beer industry.

Harris, White and Thompson learned to brew by watching YouTube videos and have honed their craft through trial and error. They developed some of their favorite recipes through pure experimentation, like when they made a Christmas stout (which they dubbed “Black Santa”) by fermenting the ingredients for fruitcake—currants, raisins, sour cherries and ginger spice.

Now that they’ve secured seed funding for their site and begun renovations, the trio is focused on perfecting their recipes and setting a menu for the taproom. Since they’re playing the long game, they’re already thinking about potential businesses that they could spawn by bringing craft beer to a new neighborhood and customer base.

“In five or six years, I want to look back and say, ‘We blew the scene up,’” Harris said.

Potter agreed that Harris Family could inspire other people of color to pursue careers in brewing or brewery ownership.

“I think it’ll be a huge blueprint for brewers across the country trying to get into the game,” Potter said. “Being the first is a big deal.” **B**

For more information on Harris Family Brewery, visit harrisfamilybrewery.com or the Facebook page.

Photos by Billy Hicks.



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