

# The Washington Post

## Virginia Is Also for Beer Lovers

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Special to The Washington Post

Wednesday, January 21, 2009; Page C02

I've planned a two-day trip for my boyfriend, Mike, and me to the Charlottesville area's historic wine country, which some consider the birthplace of American viticulture. The only thing is, we're going to explore another spirit entirely: beer. Mike, a hobbyist home-brewer, is particularly keen on the idea.

Charlottesville is certainly no microbrew capital like Portland, Ore., or Denver. But to its credit and beer aficionados' pleasure, it has embraced making craft beers. The town and scenic surrounding areas boast four homegrown breweries and brew pubs (which, conveniently enough, are in the process of organizing an official Charlottesville beer trail), and these spots build on a local brewing history that stretches back more than 200 years.

Mike and I head out and hit the "trail" one early winter weekend. Our first stop? [Thomas Jefferson's Monticello](#).

We dodge the guided stroll through Jefferson's home and instead duck into a basement corridor, where we find the beer cellar. Through placards, historical artifacts and period reproductions of items such as casks, the whitewashed 12-by-16-foot room reveals the brewing background of early America's most famous wine connoisseur.

It turns out that Jefferson reserved wine as an after-dinner treat at Monticello; beer and cider were the "table liquors," and the industrious and experimental Founding Father orchestrated the brewing of both on his estate. He even grew many of his own grains and hops.

What did those early beers taste like?



For \$5, you can taste six house-made creations at Blue Mountain Brewery in Afton, Va. (By Michael Dolan For The Washington Post)

"I wonder. It'd be fun to get the recipe and try to produce some," says Shelley Moss, tasting-room manager at Starr Hill Brewery in Crozet, our next destination.

Now occupying a former [ConAgra](#) factory about 12 miles west of Charlottesville, the brewery began in 1999 as a humble downtown brew pub.

Mike and I wander into the cavernous building and find a space along the U-shaped tasting bar, where Starr Hill provides free samples of most of the eight beers in its regular and seasonal roster. These include its amber ale (caramel-y, award-winning) and the Love (unfiltered wheat beer, popular and available May through August). During our visit, there's also a limited-edition trial called Lucy, a delicious full-bodied lager with hints of lime and ginger.

Our taste buds tingling, Mike and I join the (also free) brewery tour just starting. Moss leads about 20 of us through the facility, explaining ingredients, brewing styles and on-site equipment. It's a good Beer 101 lesson and also manages to entertain Mike, who has been on a lot of such tours.

After some much-needed downtime and eats, the beau and I conclude our day at Charlottesville's South Street Brewery, a decade-old downtown night spot that draws a largely young professional and grad student crowd. On a winter evening, the place is inviting, with its dark wood, exposed brick and fireplace.

At the long copper-topped bar, we dive into a beer sampler: \$6 for seven tastes. Two are guest appearances from other breweries. The other five are house-made, including Sahti (an easy-drinking, straw-hued, Finnish-style brew) and Absolution Ale (a rich, malty English-inspired beer).

Sunday morning seems like the perfect time to pop out to the vineyard-dotted countryside of Afton (about 20 minutes west of Charlottesville), where a brewery and tasting room called Blue Mountain Brewery has been competing for wine-country customers for a little more than a year.

The porch is the best place to soak in the mountain views, but given the chill, we snag a table inside the sunset-hued, high-ceilinged tasting room. Mike and I order upscale pub grub and the requisite beer sampler (\$5, six house-made tastes). Blue Mountain is a bit more experimental than the other nearby brew houses, and this morning, we sip the glory of this risk-taking by way of the Double Barrel-Aged Chocolate Cherry Imperial Bourbon Stout, a decadent, dessert-y combination of flavors neither of us has experienced (the brewing involves cocoa nibs, cherries and aging in both bourbon and wine barrels).

"We get bored," co-owner Matt Nucci says. "We're always going to have a lager, kolsch and our Full Nelson [pale ale], but with the other beers, we like to mix it up."

Which reminds us, we've got one more stop: the rustic Devils Backbone Brewing Co., at the foot of Wintergreen ski resort. Inside, we discover a bustling crowd of all ages, including a lanky, longhaired man the bartender helps us identify as Tom Peloso, a hometown musician who broke into the big time with rockers Modest Mouse.

The beer sampler here (\$6) scores us eight flavors, including Five Apostles Saison (a sweet, Belgian style) and Black Rock Stout (roasted coffee and chocolate finish). Some of the brews lack a certain oomph (the

place has, after all, been open only since November). The atmosphere, on the other hand, needs little improvement.

As Mike and I savor the last drops in our glasses, we realize we've conquered the beer trail. Or maybe it's the other way around.