

Marion distillery bringing local whiskey to market

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Scott Schumaker had planned to burn his potatoes for fuel until someone told him they would make a better drink.

“We live off the grid,” said Schumaker of his family farm in the Marion community where he and his wife, Dana, produce their own energy. They had a potato chip concession trailer, and he had the idea to use excess potatoes to generate energy.

“I talked to other people who said it would be better to drink than to burn the potatoes. It’s worth a lot more money that way,” Schumaker said. “So I thought, what the heck, I always wanted to make alcohol.”

A confessed “moonshiner,” Schumaker has studied the history of alcohol production in this region, from those early pre-Prohibition days to today. He has also studied methods of alternative energy. His original career was as a mechanical engineer and air-conditioning contractor in Florida. Today he works as an engineering technician at Smyth County Community Hospital as well as operating the distillery.

Schumaker said he grew up in the mountains of Vermont and had always wanted to come back to the mountains. “I fell in love with this place when I came here for a vacation,” he said of Smyth County. “It’s a lot like where I grew up. I love the people, and I have a lot of personal history here.” So after their kids had grown and gone (Scott and Dana have a son in the Navy and a daughter in Florida), they decided to move to Marion.

When the potato-fuel project transformed into plans for a tastier mixture, Schumaker said he got a still and made mash and alcohol. “I was told it was good stuff,” he said.

He went to work with a distiller and developed Appalachian Mountain Spirits at Virginia Sweetwater Distillery.

Located at the family farm high above Walkers Creek Road, the first legal distillery in Southwest Virginia produces handcrafted whiskies and is bringing two spirits to market.

“Virginia Sweetwater Moonshine is a traditional corn whisky made from locally grown Indian non-GMO corn,” said Schumaker of his products. “It is wonderful on the rocks and a true sippin’ whisky. It is formulated to be delicious and enjoyable by itself. War Horn Whisky is a sweet smoked oak and honey-aged whisky that is crafted in honor of my younger brother, the late

Colonel Sean Schumaker, U.S. Army, recipient of two Bronze stars. He was commander of the 32nd Signal Corp Battalion, which saw intense action in Iraq and whose command battle cry is 'Sound the war horns!'

"My brother spent most of his army career outside the United States and we were looking forward to reconnecting," said Schumaker, "but he passed from a heart attack in December 2012. He would really get a kick out of this and would love the Mighty, Mighty Deuce (named for Schumaker's 1962 two-and-a-half-ton army truck)."

The distillery is also working on a third product, a single malt whisky, to be introduced this spring.

"We are one of the few distilleries that malts and smokes its own grains," Schumaker said. "Revelations Single Malt Corn Whisky will appeal to the scotch fan as it has a wonderful smoky flavor with overtones of honey, spice and light sweet-n'-salty flavor on the lips, the aftertaste."

Schumaker said he's been told that no one else in the country is producing a single malt corn whisky. Most use rye and barley. Corn has a lighter taste, he said. This product, he hopes, will also help local corn producers. All his ingredients are being purchased in the region, and he wants to buy products as close to home as possible.

And not only product ingredients but the glass in which it is bottled is American-made, Schumaker said. In the planned gift shop at Virginia Sweetwater Distillery, there will be locally made crafts and gifts, and there will be an artisan blacksmith on site during the summer.

"Our mission is to have fun, be proud of our product, and give back to our community," Schumaker said.

Scott and Dana, who is creative director for the venture, have Virginia Sweetwater Distillery in full production, but they and two part-time employees are still working on the site, developing parking and improving the road. They expect to be ready for full public access in May, and plan a full gift shop, tours and an ABC store in the future.

"Local law prohibits our farm distillery the same rights as farm wineries and breweries," Schumaker said when it comes to tastings and sales on site. As a dry county, Smyth does not allow sales of liquor and mixed drinks, although it is allowed within Marion town limits. "Customers will be able to purchase our products at Virginia ABC stores and plans are to distribute throughout Florida," Schumaker said.

But even though they won't be able to taste or purchase the product on site, said Schumaker, guests at Virginia Sweetwater Distillery will be treated to "Still Nights" where they will get the opportunity to become an official moonshiner with "on-the-job training" by performing all the processes it takes to make an award-winning spirit. "From mashing to bottling, the guests get to

do it all,” he said. “This will be a four-hour class complete with dinner and limited to six guests at a time.”

Schumaker said the distillery makes enough now to satisfy local demand and encourage tourism and expected demand. He is working on developing markets for selling his products, including ABC stores. He chose to market Florida – as well as Virginia – because of his family’s history there. “I spent 30 years there, I went to college there, got married and had kids there, and my parents live there,” he said. “We built an air-conditioning company, but I was always longing to come back to the mountains.”

Schumaker’s efforts to boost Virginia agriculture – he leases farm property in Rural Retreat to grow corn for his whisky – have garnered state support. When Virginia Sweetwater Distillery opens in May, the secretary of agriculture has asked to perform the grand opening, Schumaker said.

“The Virginia Agribusiness Council is extremely excited about the distillery,” he said. “We have plans to do some bigger things in the future. We want to build a larger distillery in downtown Marion. All it takes is time and patience. Starting a distillery in America is not a simple endeavor.”

“I think it’s one of the most exciting things I’ve ever worked on,” said Ken Heath, director of community and economic development in Marion. “I think it would bring a lot to the town, the downtown, and the region. Our job is to do everything we can to help him. I think he’s got a lot of potential.”

Schumaker said all the government agencies he’s dealt with, from Virginia to Florida to Chicago, have been very helpful. “The fact that it’s a farm distillery cuts out a lot of red tape,” he said. “The state of Virginia is so pro-agriculture, and Smyth County officials have really helped. DOT is helping with signs on the highway.”

“We are producing a product from ingredients grown in Virginia, and hope to distribute it locally as part of the tradition of this area,” Schumaker said. “The liquor that flowed out of these hills quenched the thirst all across the country. Unfortunately, it fueled crime during Prohibition. It also created an entire industry called NASCAR.”

Those who would like to receive “The Mash Times News” newsletter or more information about a private tour can email the Schumakers at appmntspirits@yahoo.com or visit www.VirginiaSweetwaterDistillery.com. You can also check them out on Facebook. They are located at 760 Walkers Creek Road in Marion.

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