



Jeremy Wirtes

Triple Crossing Brewing Company

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here in Richmond, Virginia, and the date is March 8th, 2023. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Jeremy Wirtes: My name is Jeremy Wirtes. I'm one of the cofounders of Triple Crossing Brewing Company.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sweet. And tell me a bit about where you were born and how you got here to Richmond, Virginia?

Jeremy Wirtes: Born in Massachusetts.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. Western Massachusetts, not Boston. Everyone always asks that. That's the first question usually.

Sarah Rodriguez: Good to specify.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. But with a nonregional dialect it's hard to tell.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: I don't really have the accent. No one really does that far west. We're on the upper northwest corner so you could stand in New York State at the same time, like, two miles from my aunt's house.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, I didn't realize that.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, it's way up. Appalachian mountains run right alongside it. Grew up kind of a rural kid, late [19]80s, [19]90s kid where we would take our bikes off on the fire roads into state forest land and come back when it got dark if we didn't fall or do whatever.

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Building dams in creeks and fishing and all the things that kids in a town of three thousand people do.

Sarah Rodriguez: Can you tell me a bit about who you grew up with in your house?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. My mom and dad and I've got a younger brother. He moved out to New Mexico a couple years ago which is pretty wild. No one in the family has ever moved that far out west. We always seem to be East Coast people for some reason. I don't know how that happens, but it does. Grew up family of four. My dad was on a police department when I was a kid in Newport News but before that he joined the Army when I was nine years old. So we left Massachusetts to move to Germany for three years which was a really awesome experience even being nine years old. The culture, just the way they—they party for any reason whatsoever.

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Those people, apart from trying to take over the world, like to get down. [Laughter] We lived on the outside of a castle downtown, literally across the street you could see it, where the moat used to be. And they filled it with grass and put playgrounds and stuff in it, but the witching tower is still there. Just a really interesting place to spend nine through twelve.

Sarah Rodriguez: A magical time.

Jeremy Wirtes: Very much so. It's a really terrible way to put it but if you've ever been to Busch Gardens that's kind of what it's like. [Laughter] They copied a bunch of that because it's just like that. A really cool experience. Thrust into new environments with people I didn't know. Always the new kid just because we moved quite a bit. And then he got stationed in Newport News up towards the peninsula and kind of grew up there from twelve on, like, seventh grade, a really awkward grade, all the way until college started where I went to James Madison University out in Harrisonburg.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And did you say your dad was in the military?

Jeremy Wirtes: He was, yeah. He was in the military to start. He did six years and then after the first three years we moved to Newport News which is how we got to Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: And then he was on a police department from then on.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Right. And what does your mom do?

Jeremy Wirtes: My mom worked for the government also. She was a defense logistics coordinator where she would help set up—it's almost like a college program for civilians who get government service jobs where they become really invested in the logistics of the military and the way things move. It's an intern program so she would be in charge of hiring and firing and selecting of those people and their management in that program all the way through. She did that for twenty something—she just retired a couple years ago.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. That's impressive.

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Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. Quite a big deal.

Sarah Rodriguez: And tell me a bit more about—you moved around a lot growing up but what was food like at home? Was it more survival food or . . . ?

Jeremy Wirtes: No. It was really almost that Norman Rockwell version of New England.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, right.

Jeremy Wirtes: Obviously, just normal things that every American kid would eat like chicken nuggets and French fries and whatnot.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who doesn't love that?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, everyone does that, but then there was also, on my dad's side, he grew up on a hundred-and-something acre farm that had a sugar house which is where they make maple syrup.

Sarah Rodriguez: Hmm.

Jeremy Wirtes: A few times I got involved in helping bring wood in for the fires 'cause that thing just boils forever and I would drink unfinished maple syrup off of the cooling tower that they would have and just get crazy nuts on sugar.

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And they would make maple candies, too, where it's almost like dehydrated and you pop them out of the molds and it's just like pure maple sugar at that point.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow!

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, it's amazing. It feels horrible on your teeth as a grownup –

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, I can only imagine.

Jeremy Wirtes: —but if you were to throw one in a cup of coffee it's just great.

Sarah Rodriguez: Mmm.

Jeremy Wirtes: That is very classic New England and that's one of the things that sticks out the most to me. We left when I was nine, so I didn't spend a lot of time there, but we did go back a lot.

Sarah Rodriguez: You still have family?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. All my family is still up there. They're a town or two apart from each other.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. There's something about that small rural town thing where they don't leave.

Sarah Rodriguez: It has its own gravity.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, they kinda stay. And I kinda get that. There's something about I always want to go to the mountains when I'm here. There's just something about that, that call of, like, to go back to that sort of setting and feel. And my wife, she's from Florida, from the beach, so that's where she wants to be, and I kinda want to be out in the woods. [Laughter] We make it work.

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For food otherwise and drink, too, in Germany—obviously, I didn't drink any alcohol. I think I was allowed to legally, I guess, but my parents being Americans it's probably just not the best idea. It was nothing for us to go to a festival on the street for no reason whatsoever. I don't know why they were having it, but they were, and I would go order and pick up beers.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, okay.

Jeremy Wirtes: I can see it now. I'd walk up with the money and hand it to the guy and tell him, "Two beers," and then just bring them back in huge mugs and put them on the table.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. That's an important role in a family. [Laughter]

Jeremy Wirtes: It was, yeah. They didn't have to get up. [Laughter] It was an unbelievable experience for sure.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. And so we're in Newport News. You say you stick around in Virginia to go to college?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: What comes after?

Jeremy Wirtes: After that was me working at a police department here locally.

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In college I was one of those kids who didn't have a major until the last possible second. I think one of the questions that's coming our way is what did you want to be when you grow up? I can't answer it. I had no idea. And I'm still not sure I know. [Laughter] There's a thing where

it's just hard for me to hone in on any one thing. This turned out to be that, I guess, but for then I thought this was a decent job. I can help people; I can do what I think is the right thing, and it was for a little while. I think I stayed a little too long. I think three years would've been really, really good for me, a great experience, something I can always look back to, but I ended up doing five-and-a-half more.

Sarah Rodriguez: In addition to the three?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. So it was eight-and-a-half total before I transitioned outright to this.

Sarah Rodriguez: Immediately?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. I've never had a real job. Never had a real job.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] Maybe that's the goal.

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Jeremy Wirtes: I don't know. It wasn't at the time. The idea was never to be at a desk, I guess, and now I'm at a desk a lot which is part of our story and how we grew to be what we are in the team that I manage and how it all works. So it's necessary, and I fight it as much as I can, but it is a daily struggle.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Sure. And how did you first get into—you had that early experience with beer in Germany.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: But how did you start—was it kind of a hobby to get into brewing or how did that happen?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. My parents were home brewers when we got to Newport News.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

Jeremy Wirtes: There was a local home brew shop that also sold woodstoves. Back in those days ingredients were rough. Especially looking back on it now, the access to ingredients that even I had when I started home brewing—man, what year was that? It must've been, I don't know, 2010, give or take, I think is when I started home brewing.

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Even then the access to ingredients was pretty good and then it got significantly better each year thereafter. But back when my parents did it it was like malt extract in a can that came from wherever and it'd been sitting on that shelf for who knows how long. Nothing was fresh. Nothing was vacuum sealed properly. But they started it and they wanted to do it anyway and it was really neat to see them go through the process of it, be bubbling away actively in the garage, which is a terrible place to ferment beer, but they didn't know that then nor did I. Temperature control is the number one thing. But it was still cool to watch them go through that. And then, when it was done, they would boil sugar on the stove, and we would bottle condition it. We would help. We would get to clean bottles and fill them and cap them. And then they'd store them in a closet for a couple of weeks and then they'd check them out and see how they were. I wasn't involved in that part of the process, but yeah, they started.

Sarah Rodriguez: So this was during your teen years that you were helping out?

Jeremy Wirtes: For sure. Yeah, I must've been fourteen or fifteen at the time.

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It was just neat to see a hobby take place. It wasn't necessary that it impacted me to start home brewing later when I got to be twenty-eight, twenty-nine. It wasn't that, but I got into that by—in college we would buy Sierra Nevada when we could afford it. We'd get the coupon out of the thing for Food Lion. [Laughter] God, back then for a twelve-pack it must've been fifteen bucks, maybe fourteen, which was so good compared to now.

Sarah Rodriguez: Dang. Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: And we would save up to do that instead of buying a bunch of cases of Southpaw or something really, really not great. [Laughter] We'd save up to buy one of that once in a while. That's about as far as we could go with it, and that's as far as I went with it for a while until just got into it by wanting just something better, just something more. I got really deep into coffee and went down the espresso rabbit hole after our honeymoon to Italy.

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Just the depth of flavor and what that was and the culture behind it and the process just really appealed to me as a thing. Got deeply into that and then beer was kind of like the next logical—it's like I'm drinking this stuff, this garbage once in a while; maybe there's something more. And there was and there is. And just got heavily into a few brands that are no longer—like Green Flash West Coast IPA. I think they're back again now but that's a whole other story. But it was just really impactful to have some of these beers at that time and recognize that people were doing amazing things with ingredients that huge, larger breweries just weren't doing and weren't interested in. And that got me to thinking, well—I wanted a hobby that I could do at home 'cause I had started a family at that time. I've got three kids. And when that starts it just gets to be cumbersome to try and leave so I wanted something I could do at home, I could do it before they

wake up. I could wake up at six o'clock on a Saturday morning and start and I could get it done in four to six hours on the home brew scale.

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So really you kind of saved your day. It wasn't bad. A buddy of mine had started doing it and he had a kit. He bought everything. And I decided that I do not need to get into one more thing. I really just don't need to do this, but I wanted to try. He offered me his kit, which was a kettle, the bucket fermenter, and all the supplies needed, other than ingredients, to start. So I took off to a local home brew shop that he recommended and had them set me up with a kit to get started on the ingredient side and then just went for it. And the first beer was a bourbon barrel aged porter that, at the time, I didn't think it was terrible. I'm a huge critic of my stuff but normally I would've told you—plenty of batches after that were horrible; don't get me wrong, they were – but that one actually turned out kinda okay. We actually opened up the last bottle of that I had when we brewed our first beer at our downtown location.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, how cool.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. And it didn't taste very good, but it was really old and in rough shape.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Inaudible 0:13:04] [Laughter]

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. And luckily, because it turned out well, I think I said, you know what, let me keep trying this. It's like early success was enough to keep me going where I think

if that beer had been unpalatable I might've been, like, nah, I'll just keep buying it. That's how easy these shifts can occur.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: And then it just took off from there. I became really obsessed with dialing in every little thing that I could control along the way. I would brew two or three times a week. And if I didn't finish something I would just dump it 'cause it wasn't about that. It was about figuring out the process. It was about figuring out what I like, what I'm looking for, and can I create what I'm looking for via the process?

Sarah Rodriguez: The fine tuning.

Jeremy Wirtes: Absolutely, a hundred percent. And I would change one variable about a given beer and try it that way and see what happened.

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'Cause there are a billion different variables in this game despite the fact that it can be simplified to many by it being malt, hops, yeast, water. That's great but there's a zillion different options and combinations. And then there's process choices. You figure out pretty quickly that you should control fermentation temperature, so I got a fridge to do that. That upped my game by a zillion. That tasted great. And then I abandoned bottle conditioning, which can cause oxidation, especially at the home brew scale it's very difficult to do it properly. I abandoned that to go straight to kegging.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

Jeremy Wirtes: The beers tasted far better than they had before. So there was this natural progression of best practices on the home brewing side that I had gotten to fairly quickly by just also an endless amount of research on the internet. I just could not not look it up. I just had to. I was obsessed. And I got to where to me they tasted pretty good, which is the *worst* way to decide to open a brewery is if you think it's good. The next worst way is if your friends think it's good.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, no.

Jeremy Wirtes: And that happens all the time where people take out a sizable loan on a personal guarantee because someone told them their beer's pretty good, you should sell this. Well, everyone says that to you 'cause it's a really nice thing to say but do they really mean it? And do you mean it? If you have it and you think it's great, is it? That's a hard thing. That's a very fine line to have with yourself. Or if you're unwilling to have the hard conversation with yourself then how can you expect it to be anything more than just not great?

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Were you in Richmond at this time?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. How did you end up in Richmond?

Jeremy Wirtes: I applied for jobs, and this was one of the first places that gave it to me. My wife's family was here at the time and we both were lucky enough to just find jobs here. And Richmond's a cool town. It's got a great feel, so we were all over that pretty quickly.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Were you still working for the police at this point?

Jeremy Wirtes: I was, yeah. And I wasn't sure where that was gonna go or where we were gonna go, if we were gonna stay or if I was gonna apply for a federal job, which never happened. Once that SB 604 [Senate Bill 604] bill came to be a thing is when the idea for this really started to heat up amongst the three of us. I'd only been home brewing for a little bit, I guess a couple of years before that thing came to be. And that just absolutely made it possible from a business standpoint to open up a very small brewing location.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so tell me how you met Scott [and Adam].

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. Adam was good friends with my wife, Corinne. They went to high school together so they were part of a friends group and we would hang out with him and his wife at the time. We would hang out with them here and there.

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He called me Christmas morning randomly 'cause he'd gotten a home brew kit for Christmas and knew that I'd gone down some rabbit holes with it and already had some things figured out so he could skip a lot of the problems by just asking, which is great. And then he did. I helped him brew a batch or two and he kind of got on his way and good for him he listened to pretty much everything I told him and decided to go down the fermentation temperature control and all the other things.

Sarah Rodriguez: He learned from your mistakes.

Jeremy Wirtes: Totally, and that's all I wanted for him 'cause it's so frustrating to make five gallons of liquid that you just don't want to drink, let alone a couple thousand gallons of

liquid you don't want to drink. [Laughter] And over home brewing at his house or mine we just kind of started talking about, you know, that new law, it just seems like—'cause I was watching Northern Brewer, a very storied home brewing company that got bought by Anheuser-Busch which really wasn't the best for that company.

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They've since resold I guess back to someone else so it's now independent again which is kind of interesting. But they used to host a web series called *Brewing TV*. Those guys were based out of Minnesota so they would kind of venture out around that area and go check out the beer scene around there and talk to breweries and see what's going on. And they'd travel to Denver, Colorado, back when I think a lot of the Denver neighborhoods were starting to turn into places where people would go. And they were turning into neighborhoods and people were putting breweries in and high-end craft cocktail bars and you name it. And Denver Beer Company opened, and they opened a seven-barrel, really small—it's like twelve gallons to seventeen gallons of beer—they opened a brew pub basically with no food. So their laws allowed it back then –

Sarah Rodriguez: I was about to say. . . yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: —they allowed it to where you could just serve beer and it was fine.

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But they served it all onsite which there's a whole lot that's great about that in that you can make a beer, turn it over, and sell it to people directly across the bar and then you get instant feedback on sales, how well it's doing. You don't have to look into the distributor model and figure out

how well did it sell through the bars? How many kegs did we get back? Did the kegs tap properly? Is the beer okay as I pour it at night? Is it doing okay in this other tap that I don't have any control over? Did they store it warm? There's such a level of control when you decide to sell it across your own bar that I think is often overlooked by a lot of breweries that want to go bigger and be heavy in the distro game.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Jeremy Wirtes: And I think there's a benefit to both, and most do both. It's not uncommon. But for us to open, I just had far too much respect and fear for the beer itself to not have as much control over it as I possibly could.

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So I figured if we're not packaging—'cause that's its own entire animal of frustration, expertise, you name it—if we weren't doing that, great, so we can put it all in the serving tanks. So we have five serving tanks. We would serve an entire batch. You'd tap the tank, and you'd pour each beer off and it just pulls down from the tank completely.

Sarah Rodriguez: This is at the downtown location?

Jeremy Wirtes: Our downtown, yeah, original location. And then, if we weren't distroing that means that if something went weird and it tasted weird I would know it that day and we could pull it.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's nice.

Jeremy Wirtes: It was really comforting to bite off that much of the apple rather than trying to open up a really big production site like this one. And a lot of people did back then, and they often hired professional brewers, which I was not.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: So the amount of trepidation in opening one at all was pretty scary 'cause this is a whole other way that this stuff gets made.

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The science and the principles are exactly the same. None of that changes. It's just the way that you move liquid, or you move chemicals, move beer, it's all through pumps or pressure or gravity. And there's tricks of the trade. There's all kinds of best practices you have to learn that you don't get from dumping things from bucket to bucket. You just don't get that. So we hired a really great consultant to do a two or three week for me once we opened. He helped me out prior with ordering some of the things we needed, getting certain things in-house so that we knew we were ready to go that day. He was there for three or four weeks maybe, I guess. Really helpful. Really got me up to speed pretty quickly on moving liquids and boiling on a commercial scale, cleaning a tank through a spray bottle and a pump, PPEs, the personal protective equipment stuff that you just don't think about when you're home brewing 'cause you're in your garage; it doesn't matter.

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But in a real commercial setting those are important things and he just got me pretty up to speed on all that stuff fairly quickly. Helped us brew the first four or five beers, I guess, in total and

then on the ninth or tenth I took it over solo and that was pretty frightening. The beer turned out fine. It was great, but that was pretty scary.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: The first brew date with him I think was like an eighteen-hour ordeal of total disaster and we still somehow got the wort, which is the prefermented beer, into the tank and got it fermenting fine even though we had multiple pump failures, and our chiller went down. Just all these things that just really—everyone's first brew day is like that. Almost no one escapes that level of disaster. We were fortunate enough to escape it here. We had a little bit more experience working with chillers and pumps, and we had a boiler tech to make sure everything was running the right way.

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And he came out for that too and he was just here for one day, just that first brew day. He was, like, you're good, dude. You're fine. You got it. So yeah, that was that.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what was the name of the consultant?

Jeremy Wirtes: John Bryce.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Is he based around here?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. The Charlottesville area.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Jeremy Wirtes: He's got a few other brewing projects that he's a part of and he's helped countless others. Just really good, no nonsense. Kind of gives you the information you need right away. And if you're able to take it on it'll really get you down the road pretty quickly.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Go back a little bit more and tell me more about when y'all first decided to open. What was it like leading up to that day? What was that day like, do you remember?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. I'll try. Adam knew Scott from his high school. He's a little bit younger, a year or two younger than us. He knew him from there and knew that he had an entrepreneurial spirit. I think he'd had an app go that worked out, a couple other small things here and there.

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But he really wanted to start something and we all kind of saw this happening. 'Cause I went to Hardywood's grand opening for their first day, which is wild to think about that now.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: Those dudes, they're a huge part of why SB 604 is what it is. They kind of knew and helped spearhead that effort. Everyone in town owes them quite a bit for the scene we have now. So we met over beers, talked about it, and just thought that at this scale that's something we might be able to pull off. So we took to forming a business plan, trying to figure out what our pricing might look like. And we broke everything down as far as we could and as far as we knew at the time, which is adorable to look back on it, probably. I try to get everything down to, like, the ounce produced cost on what a bag of malt might be.

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So I was signing up for vendors—the weird part about opening one of these is you don't want to go any further than you have to until you're sure you have to 'cause there's an outlay there or a commitment. You definitely do not want to sign a lease until you know you have to. So we were, like, well, if I want to get pricing from these vendors I have to get a tax ID which means we've got to become a real company which means you got to spend a little bit of money to get incorporated. Even if we don't do anything with it, we have to go down that road. So we did and that got me pricing. So I was getting pricing from everything. We were compiling all that together. And then, the real issue for us we wanted to focus on—'cause no one else at the time was—fresh hop-forward beers. That was my game from a home brewing perspective. Man, there must've been three or four breweries at the time in Richmond, really in its infancy, and none of those guys had really focused on that yet. They were making them. It wasn't that. It wasn't a big focus for them.

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And no one was doing it the way I wanted to do it with the seven barrels fresh. It would go fairly quickly, turn it over and we'd do it again and try new things and get feedback from people.

Sarah Rodriguez: Become kind of like a laboratory for it.

Jeremy Wirtes: Completely. That's exactly what we intended it to be. So with that came the constraint of the hop contract world and what that entails. So to make those beers you've got to have certain hops or hops you like or characterful hops, however you want to categorize them, but A) they're expensive, and B) that market is completely based on futures. So to get in with

any buying power or let alone any choice of what you're buying you have to buy enough and commit to buying enough in the next three years to establish those relationships.

Sarah Rodriguez: What did that feel like?

Jeremy Wirtes: We couldn't do it. We weren't even allowed. That's the worst part about it is that we weren't allowed—we couldn't have afforded it anyway at the time if I'm honest.

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And we weren't making enough beer to be able to justify it. So we were forced into the spot market which is what's left and available.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: So the way it works real quick is that larger breweries will often have first shot at most of the lots available on a given production year. This selection happens every year in give or take September out in Yakima, Washington, which we now go to and have for the last three years, four years, give or take. COVID kinda ruined some of that. They were sending stuff out, but we got back to it. And when they decide that they want all this stuff the rest of it then goes to the next level of buying power breweries. So your Firestone Walkers and your Sierra Nevadas are up front and then the smaller guys work their way in. Then it eventually comes down to us. And then, what we don't like goes to even the next layer of how much people can select and how much they can buy.

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And then, after that's all gone most of that stuff goes to the spot market which is where anyone can buy it. And the hard part about that is you don't know what you're getting. Just 'cause you

bought a varietal called Citra, for example, doesn't mean that it's going to smell exactly like the Citra that you brewed with a couple of weeks or months back 'cause it could come from a different lot.

Sarah Rodriguez: Hmm.

Jeremy Wirtes: It's a difficult game if you want to have consistency. It can be done. It definitely can be done. You can make great beer. It's not that. It's one more layer of difficulty between being a startup and being more established. So the whole point of that story was we had to buy hops really early if we wanted to make these beers and we had to buy what's available. So some of the really incredible hop varieties that we have all the access to in the world now they were there, they existed, we just couldn't get 'em from the commercial side. I could go to the home brew store and buy an ounce or two at a time, that's no problem, but I needed, like, twenty-two pounds.

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That was not possible. So I had to home brew beers while we're trialing everything knowing that I couldn't use the best, most impactful, cool, new school varietals. I had to depend on the ones I know we could buy on spot. And I got a vendor to send me the list of what those might be, and I just lived within that and started to develop beers based on those varietals 'cause that's all we had.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you adapt your work process to that?

Jeremy Wirtes: Just evaluating—there's a lot of really old school varietals, citrus forward from the early days that were famous for early 2000s IPA like Centennial and Cascade and

Chinook and Columbus. There's bunches of them. And while they're not as new and interesting necessarily—interesting is not fair—well, they're not as new as other hops, they're still great and they're classics for a reason.

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And there was a new varietal that HopUnion created for—they wanted to experiment with a bunch of hops, but they didn't want to necessarily toss them when they're—maybe they can't grow them because they don't produce enough yield or maybe they're not resistant enough to downy mildew or another disease that hop growers have to face. So they'd grow these experimentals and they'd like them a lot, but they knew that it wasn't marketable. Well, they would blend them into a Falconer's Flight, which is a hop blend that's really famous now and it was pretty new back then. And it's a mix of most of the citrus hops, the old school ones, your Columbus, Centennial, Chinook, Cascade, and then some experimental stuff that they don't tell you what's in there, but it's a blend. So the core of the blend kind of remains the same but it does change year over year, and you can't really select for it. They just make a pelletized blend and it's all in there and that's what you get. And that was available to us and that was one of the most exciting—it's not even a varietal because it's multiple varietals—it's one of the most exciting hops we had access to.

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So I figured we should make a beer definitely based on that one heavily and we did. And we included a couple more that are not in the beer now but that beer, Falcon Smash, which is our most popular beer, that's where that beer came from.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: And we bought those hops early on a pallet, and I had to sweet talk a guy at a cold food storage place, 'cause you're supposed to store hops cold, and he was cool enough to just say, "Yeah, I guess, man." Normally Food Lion goes there. That's where they pull from.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: So he just was fine with some guy being, like, hey, I got a half a pallet of hops here. Do you mind storing it for—he came up with a number per month that was totally reasonable and cool, and he let us store them there until we opened. I think I bought them three or four months in advance.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

0:31:59

Looking back on it it's unbelievable he allowed us to do that, but it got us to where we needed to be 'cause if we didn't buy that stuff you just really couldn't wait until after 'cause you don't know if you can get it or not 'cause it's on the spot market.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right, right.

Jeremy Wirtes: So tried to have a little bit of forethought on our supply chain early on and make things as easy for us as possible.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. And the original location downtown, what made you decide on that location?

Jeremy Wirtes: We kind of knew what we wanted the footprint to be. We knew we wanted seven barrels. We knew we wanted to be that size ‘cause we felt like we could brew enough often enough—‘cause I was planning to be the only employee for a while. Obviously, for money reasons you can’t just—you can but you shouldn’t—pull everyone off onto salaries and get paid out of a business that’s a fledgling thing. So we knew we wanted it to be seven barrels, small, focused, and we kind of figured give or take three thousand square feet kind of felt about right.

0:33:01

We found these—they were rudimentary at the time—these CAD drawing programs you could do on your iPad or whatever.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: And I got specs from tank manufacturers, and I could lay out exactly what things might look like in theory and be, like, all right, well, nine hundred square feet for the brewing side should be fine. We could make that work, especially when we committed to, we’re never putting a canning line in there. We’re never going to bring in a mobile canner. There’s no room for that. We just shouldn’t do it. We’re not making enough beer to make it worth our while anyway. We’re going to serve it all across the bar. So we looked at a couple locations that were—there was a probably a lot more to look at back then than there are now. The city’s grown quite a bit since then. We looked at a few. Didn’t really like any of them from a parking perspective.

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We really wanted to be in the city, in downtown. We were technically in Monroe Ward. It could've been anywhere downtown give or take but this one had that—it's a 1930s carriage house and the exposed brick, it just had a natural feel that we felt like we didn't have to do much to from the tasting room perspective. It really kind of was done. There wasn't a whole lot of design involved 'cause it doesn't need it. Exposed brick's exposed brick. If you're into it, you're into it. And it had skylights, so it just has a natural cozier feel than something completely on its own. It has a parking lot, not enough spaces though. That's always been a point of contention. It's worse now than ever 'cause all the high rises that sprouted up around it, but people still find a way. They really do. Especially now that it's often a place that people come to just pop in real quick to grab cans and go. When we started it was a place where you showed up to have a few beers on a weekend or a weeknight and then probably bounce to four or five other ones.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Jeremy Wirtes: But that's kind of what got us to that. It's just a great centrally located spot.

0:35:01

You could also get there pretty quickly off of 76 or the toll road, the downtown expressway, to get there. You can get off and on pretty quick. And we kind of thought maybe that—which is starting to happen now—but we thought earlier maybe that more residential would show up to that neighborhood because I think it's zoned—we could've put a tire plant in there if we felt like it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, which is gross. We wouldn't do that. [Laughter] But it's light industrial which is very odd given—maybe given what the neighborhood used to be it's not odd but to us it's—'cause that larger apartment complex that VCU built—or dorm, I guess it would be—that's been there since we opened.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. So there were some concerns about the smell. Some people don't like the way the boiling wort smells like. Some people really love it. Some people really don't. I've never found an in between, like, it's fine. It's usually, like, that stinks or that smells great.

0:35:59

But we never heard anything, seemed to be fine. So that's how we settled on that one.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And do you remember opening day?

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Sarah Rodriguez: How was that?

Jeremy Wirtes: As chaotic as you'd expect it to be. We had a friends and family run-through a few nights before that, if I remember right, so our servers at the time got an opportunity to pour beers, get a feel for how the draft system works, run the tabs, do all the things. They got a feel for that which was—at the time we were, like, we can't afford to do it. We need to just open. But you have to afford to do that, otherwise you're just going to give people a really rough experience on the—and you probably are anyway but that just compounds it if you don't do it. No, it was just a typical all-hands-on deck for every hour the night before right up until you go to bed, up that morning and . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Jeremy Wirtes: And just the fear of how it's going to go. Is anyone going to show up?

Does anyone know; don't they? They did.

0:37:01

We had a line wrapped around the building to the deck for most of the day.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. It was just a huge event for one to open, much more I think maybe than it is now. Maybe not. I'm not sure. But for one to open in the city it was just like a huge deal you could tell, and people came to support it, which was really great. The Falcon tank, we kept it open almost the whole time. Almost every order had one of those in it. The tap almost never closed. We were just putting cups underneath it and going and going and going and going.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: So we got some really great data that day about what people want, what they took to, what they wanted more of and that was great to see. But yeah, it was a whirlwind.

We did really well. It was a great day. No major disasters luckily. Everything poured fine.

Nothing broke. The bathrooms held on if I remember right. Just things like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's important! [Laughter]

Jeremy Wirtes: Extremely important.

0:38:00

Because we've done it a few times now but we're not above getting a porta-potty or two out here for a big event because if these things go down you've got a –

Sarah Rodriguez: You've got to be ready.

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, you do. I don't think we did that then, but you live and learn.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Wow. And then, particularly, I guess, in those early years can you think of any big successes or challenges that you hadn't anticipated cropping up?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And maybe talk about that as you expanded, too.

Jeremy Wirtes: For sure. Yeah. I didn't . . . What's a good way to put it? I guess I didn't anticipate what we would become from a brand perspective as time went on.

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And I say that just in full disclosure of the fact that we just wanted to make the best beer possible but, other than making hop forward beers that were fresh, we didn't have a super tight focus on what we were. And looking back on that that sucked. There's a big difference between a new startup brewery that has a brand, a focus, and an identity when they come to market that just shows a level of polish that I think now in today's market you must have.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: Back then we could make that mistake and it wasn't that big of a deal. We had a runway. That time was fleeting I think, but we pretty quickly figured out what we wanted to do, what we wanted to be, and what we wanted to look—it took three years, give or take. It

was when we were over here is when that really started to come into focus about what we want to be, what we want to do. But from the beginning we started to, within probably eight to ten months maybe, we started distributing a few kegs.

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We didn't understand—and that's just through a sheer lack of ignorance—we just didn't understand that if you do distribute some people will have it and if they like it they will look into it and where it came from and then want to come back. And that was a hard pill for me to swallow 'cause I just don't like giving up anything.

Sarah Rodriguez: 'Cause you had to work with a distributor?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. And Brown Distributing, they were great to us. They took us on when they probably shouldn't have but they were willing to take a bet on it. They would hand deliver those kegs in the early days to certain accounts to get us to where—if it's in the right place and noticed by beer people that's how you spread that throughout the entire community.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: 'Cause almost everyone back then had a buddy or a friend of theirs who was, like, I had this and it's good, you should try it.

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And then, because they're not in the know but their friend is, they're using that expertise to be, like, oh, I'll try that. And there's real value there. So that was a struggle because we were not set up for that. So that means that we bought a twenty-barrel fermenter, so I was brewing two batches to fill it one day, fill it halfway, come back the next day and fill it the next, but it was

taking the kettle to the brim. It was super unsafe, and I would never admit to doing it publicly like I am right now. [Laughter] Luckily it was just me. I'm not going to sue myself.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: Super dangerous, very unsafe. And then I would hand keg it and then lower it. I'd have to bring them over to our loading dock and then grab each one off the loading dock and load them down and then onto a pallet.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow!

Jeremy Wirtes: We were not set up for—yeah. You had to do it with the knowledge that this is going to get us more than just the distributor check, which is not going to do much for us, because that beer is so expensive to make at our scale that there just isn't a whole lot of margin there.

0:42:00

Sarah Rodriguez: It was more to spread the word.

Jeremy Wirtes: Completely, totally. It was a marketing expense at that point is how we had to look at it. And that was a challenge I hadn't seen coming and I think it helped us a lot, too. People would start to have it at your better beer bars in town and they would take notice and then we'd see new people come in and be, like, yeah, I had it over at whatever. I'd be working in the back 'cause it's a row of tanks so that I can be behind it like a hermit and not be seen. That's kind of my game.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: There's a row of tanks and I would be working back there, and I could just hear people talk and that's really helpful, too.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: I'd hear people say things like, yeah, I had it at the Mekong the other day. It was really good. I just want to see what you guys do. Or a buddy heard that they had it wherever and it was legit, and they wanted to show up and check it out. And in those days that's another hurdle, now that I'm thinking about it. People used to come in and it would almost be like they crossed their arms and be like, all right, show me something.

0:43:00

They'd heard that it was hyped, or they heard that their friend liked it, and they would come and be like, all right, let's see. And it was just this odd, almost like a competitive—"I go to Legend's a lot. Let's see what happens here." It's, like, you can like 'em both! We'd have people come in and whisper across the bar, "We were just at Legend." I'm, like, why are you whispering this? It doesn't matter. You can like what you like. I don't care. [Laughter] It's just this weird thing where people want to endear themselves to you by claiming they only like to come here when I know that's not true. It's fine. But people would do that, and I thought that was really, really odd that they would have this, like, well, let's see if it's any good. I think that's less so now maybe that we're established. I don't know what the shift was in there, but I think people who generally come here are just looking to—they know what we do oftentimes. I don't think there's as much beer travel as there used to be.

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So I think most of our base is people who live here locally and enjoy what we do at home and around town.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: And that's always what we've wanted anyway. I don't mind who has it, but we've always tried to appeal to that group maybe a little bit more than some of the other breweries in town. Did I answer that?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. What else?

Sarah Rodriguez: Maybe talk about at some point you realized, we can open another place. How did that happen?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. And that was another issue, too, where that place was already fairly maxed out from day one with what we could do with it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Pretty small.

Jeremy Wirtes: It's small and we bought every tank to fill it. There wasn't a whole lot of—we had one extra slot left give or take and we put that twenty barrel in which maxed out that for sure. And we had pushed the limits of the chiller. Our chiller, which keeps everything where we want it to be temperature-wise, should never have been able to handle that. Luckily, it did but it shouldn't have been able to.

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So it kind of came to be, if we canned our beer—‘cause we were watching a lot of these Northeast, New England breweries, a lot of other breweries around town—not even around town necessarily just yet but they were canning their beers and selling them onsite, which appealed to me from the onsite thing. I really liked that. And I thought, well, if we’ve got a handle on the beer side to some degree—I mean, we’re never fully going to have a handle on it but do what we can—maybe with a mobile canner where we don’t have that expertise and we don’t have that cash outlay we could bring them in, pay them to do it for that day, and then have canned beer we can sell onsite. And turn over larger batches, have a larger production space, be able to feed beer to our downtown location, be able to put cans for sale at that downtown location that are made here so that there’s just multiple points for people to get what they want.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: And it just started to make sense. We ran numbers again.

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We went back to the business plan thing and ran numbers again and took a look, and we really wanted to own the next thing ‘cause we lease our downtown location.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: And this one we bought. And luckily for us when we bought it—this neighborhood has been transitioning in many ways to a little bit more residential than it ever used to be, I guess. So we drove by this thing initially and I think I was on the phone with a real estate agent at the time, I don't remember. Scott was driving and I put the phone out and went, no, not this one. And I went back to talking ‘cause it was just immediately, like, no. ‘Cause I was

just, like, no, this thing was just a flat shell. There were no windows other than these ones for the offices. There were no roll-up doors there. There were no doors there. There was no nothing.

And it had the chain-link fence that came up on all sides. I just—no, this sucks.

0:47:01

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember what they said this was used for?

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, yeah. This was an HVAC repair shop where they'd bring the huge ones, like the ones we have, and they'd bring 'em on a dolly and work on them. And it was a dungeon. I've got a video walking through it when we were looking at it. It was a dungeon. There's no windows so it's all just dark and there's incandescent lights from the [19]60s that—it was terrible. But it was huge. We didn't need it all at all, but it was too good to pass up after looking at our other options were not nearly as good. And this gave us an opportunity to own the building which we really, really wanted to do 'cause we were going to put a ton of improvements in no matter where we go.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: And it's, like, I'm willing to do that a little bit more if I know it's ours.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: So we decided we're gonna do it. We announced it.

0:48:00

And that was a transitional time for us, too, where Scott, he was able to come off and work full time here instead of at his previous job to help with opening this thing, construction, while I'm still dealing with beer down there.

Sarah Rodriguez: Y'all kind of tag teamed.

Jeremy Wirtes: For sure. Yeah. Him and I would meet, and Adam was involved. We'd get him in on calls and he would come by when he could. We never really laid out the stages in which we'd all come off of our other jobs but this kind of just worked this way. It was fine.

Sarah Rodriguez: So y'all were still doing your jobs?

Jeremy Wirtes: I was not.

Sarah Rodriguez: You were not. Okay.

Jeremy Wirtes: They were.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. And it's hard. I would be the only one in that building all day until we opened at four and someone would knock on the door and I'm, like, I can't. Unless it's UPS and I know it, 'cause then I need something, I'm not answering the door, man.

0:49:01

I don't have time to tell you no about your chemical sales or your whatever it is you want 'cause you know we're a business now. And I would have to not go answer the door and people would stare through that door. It got to a point where we put up a blind 'cause I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: People would knock real hard and, like, it's fine. You can't see me. I don't care. 'Cause it was way more important than anything you had to tell me. I'm in the middle of boiling wort or I'm knocking out and I'm about to send yeast in. I'm not messing that up to talk to you for two seconds. I won't do it. So yeah, things got a little hairy there during that time period. So with that came the idea of opening this place up to allow for a little bit more production, actually have a team of brewers which we started.

Sarah Rodriguez: And when did this location open up?

Jeremy Wirtes: That's a great question. [Laughter] I think it's [20]17, [20]18. I'm terrible with dates.

0:50:00

Really, really bad. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. I know I was coming here by [20]18 so you've at least got that.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. I think it was December of maybe [20]17.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Jeremy Wirtes: That feels right.

Sarah Rodriguez: I can double check that.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's all right. And then, how has your role you think changed?

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, drastically.

Sarah Rodriguez: Drastically?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. When I started over there I was the sole brewer, tender of beer in any way, all the way up until it was poured. We had servers from the beginning. We would work the tap room for—it wasn't long. We worked the tap room at night for several weeks until we realized that that's not sustainable at all.

Sarah Rodriguez: So pretty soon you hired servers?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, absolutely. But for the first year and half, two years I ran all the production out of Foushee.

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That was everything from the ordering of grain, maintenancing of equipment, fixing things, being an honorary electrician and plumber, contractor, you name it. That just was the nature of it. I was the only one there and if something went down there's no one to call. That's just the way it goes. My role there was fully hands on. Adam and Scott were really helpful about the business side of things. I really did not touch almost any of that because I couldn't, and it just didn't make sense where that's not where my focus lies. I wanted to make the beers I wanted to make that we collectively also wanted to make together and have them sold to the public and have them enjoy them. That's kind of where I'm at on that. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: Which that tells me that I couldn't do it all and I never thought I could anyway.

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So my role, once we hired an assistant brewer at the time, got him up to where he could brew on his own, and move beer, carbonate, dry hop, run the cellar on his own, he allowed me some freedom to be over here overseeing the construction that was occurring here. 'Cause we had, like, ten thousand square feet of concrete being chiseled out and repoured with floor drains to the right slope, and I gotta make sure that that's how I want it to be. Even though you told everyone and it's on the drawings if you're not there to watch it happen . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: There's a lot of that that goes on when you're opening up an entire other production site.

Sarah Rodriguez: It sounds like it felt special to have this space for you.

Jeremy Wirtes: Very much so, yeah. And it was because we built it. We built what we wanted into it from the ground up early. The roll-up doors and the brewing compartment were there because—I joke and I say with some modicum of pride I guess that it's like a brewer's brewery back there. Nothing's crammed together. There's space. There still is to this day.

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There's space. I didn't take the brewhouse and shove it up against the back wall to maximize that out so we could fit two or three more tanks back there for—no. I wanted room to be able to walk through it and have a sink back there. So most things are laid out to where it's easy to get to, there's space between them, you're not crammed into—I've seen some working environments of breweries that put in really large tanks in a very small space and the amount of ducking people

do to get underneath things. And when the hoses hit the floor and cross over it's just not a fun—there's a level of cramping that goes on in some of these environments that's just not good for the soul. [Laughter] And so I wanted natural light in there 'cause we didn't have any. That was important. So we have a window up above the brew deck that shines in on the brew deck when the morning sun comes up 'cause some of them, they start pretty early. 'Cause we'll brew three turns on a Falcon day, so they start pretty early, and in the wintertime it's dark for a while.

0:54:00

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: It was designed with that in mind, like, what environment would I want to work in? And that's kind of how it started for there. So yeah, it was special.

Sarah Rodriguez: How cool.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. It's really neat to be able to—a lot of people, when they open these things, they get, and they should get, commercial brewing experience from another brewery. That's the right way to do this. I did not do that, but we had some experience in having that one the way it was and what to do and what not to do going forward. That one's run on electricity. The kettle and the hot liquor tank, they're all electric and it's just a horrible way to make beer. It works. It got us to where we were but when we came over here we knew we were going to put in a twenty-barrel. Electric's no longer an option anyway but we went right for a steam boiler which is far more efficient, uses way less gas than a direct fire setup.

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It has more headache involved in running that thing ‘cause that’s its own device that really needs special attention, but those are the things we learned along the way that, like, this is how we want to do this going forward. I wanted to buy as much, if not completely American-made stainless-steel equipment rather than the imported stuff, so we did here. We spent way up to do it and I don’t regret it for a second.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, not at all. There’s just something about that. I like the idea of it, number one, and number two, the quality on most of it is just far superior in almost every way. There’s some great imported stuff that is quite good but, yeah, I just like getting stuff that I know is made in, like, either Detroit, out in Wisconsin. I can call them up and talk to them. It’s nice.

Sarah Rodriguez: That is nice.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah.

0:55:59

Sarah Rodriguez: So kind of speaking of changes, do you remember, what did your world look like as soon as COVID[-19] happened?

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, yeah. Oh, I remember.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. ‘Cause it came at a pretty busy time of year, too.

Jeremy Wirtes: It did. Yes, it did. It was in the spring. There was a Sunday where I was hanging out with some friends and the chatter on the news had really gotten pretty big about it and it was starting to become more real as the days went on. And we were all kind of like, man,

is there anything to this, earlier on. And then, all of a sudden, it's, like, everyone's closing their places down. We gotta get in front of that. So the three of us talked to each other that night and agreed to shut down the tasting room—I think it was that Monday. And then we came in and we were, like, there's no way, a lockdown is either—I don't think it had come just yet, but we knew it was.

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It felt like it was gonna happen. So we decided really quickly, can we—luckily we had just switched over to a point-of-sale software that allowed for flexibility that we hadn't used yet but it was already there, which was super fortunate that we had done that and not had to do it and integrate it then.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: So literally in the span of a day we went from a full-on restaurant, brew pub, event space to a can depot and a delivery service overnight. We immediately went to brewing half batches of beer 'cause we didn't know where we were going.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Jeremy Wirtes: We didn't know if we could reorder ingredients, if it was going to be that weird. We didn't know if we should reorder ingredients. Like, what if we make too much beer and we can't can it all? 'Cause now you couldn't put anything into kegs—those are our reusable containers—because every restaurant and bar closed down.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see. Right.

Jeremy Wirtes: And I think people were even leery about pouring a draft beer and handing it to somebody at that time it was so new.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

0:58:01

Jeremy Wirtes: So the idea was, well, it's all gotta go into a package. It all does. And it had to for the entire industry. So now you have an entire industry that doesn't have enough cans 'cause now everyone needs cans. So there were breweries at Foushee's size, for example, that were, like, well, we're canning now. And they either didn't want to before or it didn't make sense, just like we found out, but now to stay open you're going to figure it out. So it got really hard to find cans. Luckily, we had a pretty good relationship with suppliers, so our delays weren't that bad. And we organized pretty much every server, everyone in the kitchen, every brewer, the three of us, we're all driving beer 'cause ABC [Alcoholic Beverage Control] was pretty quick about making delivery. Totally good to go.

Sarah Rodriguez: I remember that.

Jeremy Wirtes: Which was helpful. That was really good. So we started that. You know, there were some hairy moments here and there, but we were lucky to keep things going to a sustainable level through just sheer hard work and determination by the entire team.

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It was really great to see it come together. We turned that place into—it looked like a small sorting area for Amazon where every table is a rough area of Richmond and the surrounding counties.

Sarah Rodriguez: This is Foushee?

Jeremy Wirtes: No, here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, this—here.

Jeremy Wirtes: We would do it here, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, I think Foushee was shut down.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. ‘Cause it’s too small.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. We did everything. I think initially all the canning were curbside here is how it started. But everything, all the draft beer we had had to go into growlers. We had to steam those up and sell all that stuff through that way and we did. And people were so supportive from the beginning.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. That first night we said we were doing it—no small thing but we were also the first to do it. I think we beat everyone by at least a couple of days—people were just—it was overwhelming. The amount of orders that came through, we barely could deal with it it was that many.

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So we were, like, all right, well, maybe it’s better than we thought, which was a nice boost to have on these really—‘cause we hadn’t gone down the road of anyone getting it yet. That hadn’t happened yet. It did happen, obviously, but it hadn’t happened yet so that was just a nice first

piece of positivity from the whole thing was that, even at our size—and that’s something we’ve always tried to maintain is that we’re able to pivot pretty quickly. We’re still nimble. We’re a five-thousand barrel a year brewery. We have three locations, but they’re so heavily rooted in onsite sales that we can just quickly kind of turn if we need to or make a decision or make an adjustment. And we don’t have a massive relationship with a distributor that requires X amount of product must go out and these core beers must go out. So our business model has kind of stayed the same, but it allows us to have some change in there, too. And that was obviously incredibly helpful during that time period.

1:00:59

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure. Now, as we’re kind of wrapping up, do you have a favorite beer, a few favorite beers over the years that stand out, like, this was either I really like this one; this was fun to make?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah, there’s a few.

Sarah Rodriguez: Any that were, like, wow, that definitely didn’t work? [Laughter]

Jeremy Wirtes: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there is that. I’ll get to that one now. Let’s get it out of the way. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: We really wanted to brew a Belgian witbier—which we don’t make a lot of Belgian styles unless it’s the mixed fermentation stuff, which we do, we do quite well. We have Sandra. She handles all that stuff. She’s dedicated to that. That’s her thing. But otherwise we don’t brew a lot of traditional just Belgian styles.

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So we really wanted to do one for the heat of the summer and we wanted it to be can conditioned so that we could carbonate it naturally in the can which is something not many people do, and there's a reason for that and I'll get to it. [Laughter] Sierra Nevada does it really well. They've had a lot of practice. They pioneered it. They're quite good at it. Other breweries do it, too. I really do think we could do it if we tried it again but suffice it to say we were happy with the beer before it went to packaging. We put it in the package at a low level of carbonation with some additional sugar, sealed the cans, and left them warm to wait for the conditioning, wait for the carbonation to show up, the refermentation, and it just never really happened. It just didn't. And it's frustrating because we bottle condition all the time. Those mixed fermentation beers, all of them are done that way and we almost never miss. It's rare that we miss. So we were blown away that it never quite fully took. And we waited and we waited and we waited.

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It's one of those things—when a tank of beer used to irritate me I would pretend it's not there and I would delay a decision about it knowing full well that I just needed to send it down the drain. But I would, like, no, I'm not. Not today. I'm going to go home and pretend like it doesn't exist. So we'd look at that like—it was a small batch, too. Luckily, it was, like, twenty barrels. It was not crazy. But it was already in package. It sucked. It was, like, we spent all the money and all the effort and time. And there's also a point of pride in being able to pull something off that was fairly difficult for us at the time, I guess. And we'd just look at the pallet and walk by it and be, like, ah, man. All right. No, let me see. That was definitely one of them.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. There's been multiple batches of beer dumped for various reasons. We don't talk about it a whole lot but I'm not unproud of it. If we're not happy with something it just goes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: And we're fortunate enough to be in a position where we can do that, although I think everyone should be 'cause that's on you at the end of the day. [Laughter]

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You never know what you lose by putting out something mediocre or not great. There's a lot to that, especially in this game. I don't think you can maintain a reputation without maintaining that level of standard. But as far as beers go that I'm really proud of, there's several of those, too. Falcon's a big one. To watch the city, surrounding counties, people take to that beer. I've heard it mentioned—we didn't do this, we didn't say it—I've heard it mentioned as Richmond's IPA many, many times. I know we've irritated distributors alike and people with this lack of availability at times because we don't can it for market. All of our cans are sold onsite, which is something we've chosen to do. But there's also a sense of when you see it it's kind of special even though it's available. And then, it's always usually pretty fresh because the kegs, when they're local, they get turned over pretty quickly 'cause the next batch is coming back out next week.

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Our distributor usually only has a couple days' worth of stock on the floor at any one time and that keeps things pretty fresh so when you get that beer it's usually really bright, really just

impactful. When you see it poured you can almost guess that that's that. We see that it counts a lot. If there's other hazy IPAs on, we'll look at it and be, like, I wonder if that's it. That's probably it. That's probably the coolest of them all. There's some national attention we've gotten for contests that we didn't enter. [Laughter] *Paste Magazine* has done a few of those couple hundred double IPA challenges where they try everything and I think it was—man, was it 2018? I can't remember. It was a while ago now—we won numbers two and four in that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. That was really great to see that the work we put into those beers specifically at the time was validated.

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Especially on a production scale like this where we could actually join the ranks of those who were canning their beers, that felt like a really great next evolution into what we do. They weren't just draft only anymore. They were available in cans for people to take home. That was really great. I'm super proud of our lager program, too. That has absolutely been a shift in what we do. I always say that I feel like there's a natural evolution of a beer drinker, and when you make it for a living and you're around it all the time it gets really compressed and it quickly moves along the path to where if you start loving—and I'll never not—I love hop-forward beer. Love it. Always will. But I don't always want the higher alcohol versions of it. Pale ale is something I come back to regularly. Always have.

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Probably always will, both styles, whether it's your hazier styles or your West Coast style. But I always come back to that. And then, lager has absolutely become something that I look forward to personally just because there's something about being back to basics, I guess, and a cleanliness to them and a refreshment thing. And there's also a beauty in the execution of really simple ingredients with a fairly simple process that turns out a complex, easy drinking beer.

There's just a magic to 'em.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: And I think the whole world is seeing that now with the resurgence of lagers across many breweries, just regardless of their size, which is great. So I feel like that has been a fairly quick shift for us. We've been doing those for . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: To start the lagers?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. We probably started that three or four years ago, maybe five years ago now. We started at Foushee just before we transitioned most of our production to here, so it's been a while.

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And we've invested in equipment for those. We have two big forty-barrel horizontal tanks that are just for those. This system here we bought with the idea that if we wanted to do a decoction or step mashing, which lagers often require, or they can require—they need to, but they can—we bought the system to be able to do that. Didn't utilize it for the first, like, year we were here but knew full well that we'll get there. And that's also just a conscious decision, too, of, like, that was back in the days of when people would be, like, well, we could brew two pale ales in the

time it would take to brew one lager. Yeah, you can, but what are you into? There's a huge balance of what we're into and what we care about and what we're passionate about versus what sells. And I've said before that we're lucky—I feel like we're an independent band that makes the records they want to make, and they sell. That's how I feel for us.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's pretty great.

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Jeremy Wirtes: 'Cause if you take a look around, we're not doing a lot of the things you see in the modern craft beer world right now from seltzer production to really loaded up with adjunct quick sour beers or stouts or whatever. That's just not our game. And I believe full well we could do really well at that if we decided to, but I don't want to so we're just not.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: And I can hold my head high knowing that we're doing the things that we find interesting.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Jeremy Wirtes: And there's a lot to be said for that.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's very cool.

Jeremy Wirtes: And if there comes a time where, to keep the lights on if I gotta make a seltzer—oh, never mind. If I have to make a peanut butter stout I'll do it. If we gotta do it I'll do it. But anyone I've told and has heard that would know right then we're in trouble. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: I'll keep my eye on it. [Laughter]

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. If you see it, you'll know we're in hot, hot water. I'm not going to wake up one day and want to do that.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Sure.

Jeremy Wirtes: But that's just the way it goes.

Sarah Rodriguez: That kind of leads me to probably my last question. What do you see right now for the future of Triple Crossing kind of as it is now? What are some things you're looking forward to? What are some things you want for the business, for your own craft?

Jeremy Wirtes: Yeah. For me a lot of the creativity that I had early on feels exhausted and almost gone and I don't worry about that. I feel like that's a pretty common thing especially because we do have a lane that I like to stay in and live within. I think it's a pretty wide lane personally. But we don't have a bunch of uncharted territory as far as beer styles to cover anymore. We released Clever Girl the other day. That's a pretty regular offering we have at times.

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We hadn't had it in a little bit and people went nuts again like it was new. They were so excited it was back that they blew it out on the first day it came out across the three spots. That hasn't happened in a while. That's pretty great to see. So yeah, I think I just want to see a further refinement of what we do. That's really important to me. That's where my passion lies for what we do now is worrying about the minutia of our water chemistry. We were talking about yeast nutrient earlier today as a team. Yeast health, it's like those things excite me much more so now

than this cool new yeast strain. And that used to and sometimes it still does if there's something worth looking at but it's so much more about our process and the way we do things and the way we deliver beer to customers that's far more important to me. If you take a look around you'll see the way we pour our beer is not on accident. That is absolutely completely and totally focused and worked on continually.

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They should be beautiful when they're presented at the table or the bar. They just should be. And they more often than not are, but that's from a serious level of commitment across the entire team from the back of house to the front of house understanding that they're the last mile. They can either screw this up completely or make it great. That's a power that they have that the back of house doesn't have. So there's been a lot of that, the continuing education stuff we do. We do a Friday preshift where we break down—one of the brewers, Savannah, she does a really nice job of breaking down the new beers that week and she'll often present some educational topics for everyone to learn.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool.

Jeremy Wirtes: And it's really great. It's a team building thing, too. Everyone's on the same page. Yeah, as far as anything else I'd like to see for it, I'd like to see people come back to beer more than they are. I feel like the aforementioned unnamed seltzer has really become a thing—it's another offering that people seem to enjoy.

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I feel like beer has taken a little bit of a hit maybe on it, the interest in it necessarily. I don't think it's going anywhere, don't get me wrong. I really don't. But I'd like to see people come back to a really approachable lager rather than maybe the seltzer game. 'Cause I totally understand that people get fatigued on super big impression-based beers that are supposed to hit you over the head. Those can be a lot for people who just want to enjoy something, and I think a lot of craft beer, it gets lost within that for many people who just want something a little bit more simple, easy to get behind. So I'd like to see that. But yeah, apart from that, it's just doing what we do but really, really good. Just better. And also getting our team involved, which is something we do now is getting creative input from everybody.

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I really, really need them. As I said earlier, I don't have a lot of that left anymore. There's spurts of it here and there and I find it. We're doing a West Coast pale ale, something I wanted to do, but for the Pink Boots [Society] beer they wanted to do a black IPA which we hadn't done one in I don't know how long, and I don't think the whole world cares, but we don't care, we're doing it 'cause it's cool. And that's a really gratifying, fulfilling thing that's not necessarily monetary based but it just makes everyone feel good about what we're doing, that we're doing things we find cool and interesting, at least at that moment. So I think that's a big part of it, too.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Is there anything else that you can think of you want to mention or . . . feel good?

Jeremy Wirtes: No, I feel good. I think that pretty much got it, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. Well, thank you so much.

Jeremy Wirtes: Absolutely. Thank you.

Sarah Rodriguez: I appreciate it.

[End]