



Tom Sullivan

Ardent Craft Ales

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here in Richmond, Virginia, at Ardent. Do you mind introducing yourself to let people know who I'm having a beer with?

Tom Sullivan: [Laughter] Hi. My name's Tom Sullivan. I'm owner, cofounder of Ardent Craft Ales.

Sarah Rodriguez: Perfect. Now, kind of going back, do you mind—well, first sharing your birthdate for the record?

Tom Sullivan: It's December 18th, 1975.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. And where were you born and how did you get to Richmond, Virginia?

Tom Sullivan: I was—I am, I guess, still an Air Force brat so I was born in Upstate New York at Griffiss Air Force Base, which is outside of Rome, New York, right there in Central New York, and lived there for the first five or six years of my life.

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And we went to various places around the country every three to four years until eventually in high school I landed at Langley Air Force Base, which is in Hampton, Virginia, just south of Richmond, and finished my last couple of years of high school there and came to college here in Richmond, Virginia, to VCU. And had moved around enough and was happy to stay in one place for a little while. Yeah, that's the journey. But yeah, in between we were at Castle Air Force Base which is Merced, California, Central Valley California. We also lived in Omaha, Nebraska,

where the war games, the big screens that are way underground is where all that stuff happens. I got to see that as a kid.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: It was cool. But yeah, so it's basically in the middle of the country, a big Air Force base. Omaha was a cool place to be a kid.

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A short visit down south outside of Memphis at another Air Force base during the first Desert Storm, and then to Hampton, Newport News, Virginia, and then Richmond.

Sarah Rodriguez: And who was in your household as you were traveling around to all these places?

Tom Sullivan: So I have a twin sister, Katie [sp], and an older sister, Carrie [sp]. And my mom and dad are still together thankfully. So it was the five of us in each of those places. My sister peeled off. She's four years older than me. She went to college in University of Nebraska in Lincoln, so she did not move to Virginia with us. She stayed in college and then, of course, went on about her life. And my twin sister, Katie, unfortunately was injured badly when she was a kid so is now kind of permanently handicapped and still lives with my parents.

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But they lived in Newport News up until about 2010 after retiring from the Air Force and now they live in Florida.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so your father was in the Air Force. What did your mother do for work?

Tom Sullivan: My mother was a stay-at-home mom until we were probably ten or twelve or so and then she took up real estate. And when my dad retired from the Air Force in his forties he joined her in her real estate business, and they did that for a number of years until they finally retired.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see. And what was food like growing up? Y'all were moving a lot, but was there traditional foods that you typically associate with your parents or whatever?

Tom Sullivan: We definitely had kind of an all-American diet. The military does a very good job, no matter where the assignment is, of providing sort of a standard American supermarket, if you will.

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My parents were born and raised in Boston and so we kind of ate what I would think is a pretty standard American diet. We didn't eat a lot of fish. We didn't eat a lot of—this notion of sourcing food locally and regional subcultures and stuff was not really something that entered into—'cause just life in those environments, even though we didn't live on base all the time, just life in that world was fairly homogenized. So I really didn't start exploring food until I was in my later teen years. I decided to really make my father angry and stopped eating meat.

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But in that silly political statement that I decided to make really I had to put my mind to food because it was very hard to stay in that meat and potatoes diet literally. You couldn't just eat

canned peas. You had to figure out Mediterranean cuisine, Latin cuisines, things where the raw materials were available pretty much everywhere that you could kind of cobble together. We're sort of spoiled, I think, now at least here in Richmond, but you could go to a Whole Foods, and you can get all this crazy stuff where, even when I was in college, it was sort of hard to find anything more exotic than feta cheese. [Laughter] That was kind of my reality until my teenage years and then Indian cooking—and I started to open up little by little. Also was exposed to being in one place long enough and being in college and having to work while I was in school, getting restaurant jobs and being exposed to different food cultures that way.

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We were not the type of family that ate out a lot. There wasn't a lot of extra money for dining out and things so that exposure didn't really happen until I left home.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see. I see.

Tom Sullivan: But yeah, Italian food, the casseroles, like *Joy of Cooking*, that was kind of our life until college.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Yeah. Classic American cuisine for sure.

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. Right.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what was your exposure to beer growing up? Was there any exposure to that?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. Yeah. My dad was very much a beer after mowing the lawn type of guy. There was always a six-pack of Budweiser in the fridge. Occasionally he'd splurge on, like, a Michelob or something else.

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But yeah, in that life there was lots of parties, there was lots of just socializing in that world and, of course, beer was a big part of that. My parents were primarily—in the evening they would drink liquor—they're kind of old school that way—and still do. But yeah, beer was kind of always around. Wine wasn't really a factor much in my household at least. But just standard. Nothing crazy. I think my dad was kind of your average American who had traveled a bit because of the military and so understood that, like, hey, the next time I go to Europe I'm going to drink as much German beer as I can because it's so amazing. So the world that American beer was okay and that there was this other more interesting old-world tradition was definitely, I think, well understood in my home but not necessarily pursued in any way.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Sure.

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So you go to school here at VCU. At that point did you know what you wanted to pursue in terms of work?

Tom Sullivan: No. I don't know what was going on in my head then. I liked school. I was good at it. But I also kind of was tired of being on a programmed road. I was ready to do my own thing. So I didn't finish. I went to school on and off for about three years.

Sarah Rodriguez: What were you studying while you were there?

Tom Sullivan: I started general studies and then I started in information technology. It was the mid-[19]90s. It was becoming a little bit easier to understand the beginnings of the internet and all that were sort of starting to be generally accessible. So it was a little exciting. Computer aided

design and stuff was starting and so there was a lot of cool things happening that you didn't need to be—you could have your own computer for the first time and put software on it versus whatever existed before that, some Tandy 1000 Radio Shack stuff that was too obscure for the average person.

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So I pursued that. I worked in restaurants. Was really enjoying cooking and learning to cook and I opened my eyes to a lot of possibilities in food and it stoked just a permanent curiosity in food and how it's prepared and kind of the story behind cuisines. I worked in a Cuban restaurant when I was in my early twenties and learned a lot from the owner who was Cuban. Yeah, and so just kind of took that with me even though I decided that the restaurant industry wasn't a place for me permanently. It was just not exactly the lifestyle I wanted to lead.

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A little too hardscrabble. And now I'm in the beer industry so I don't know what happened.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: But I decided at the time I could get a job—we're talking maybe [19]99 or so—there was a lot of work in the tech sector for getting ready for Y2K and a lot of companies were just throwing money at this problem. They were terrified of what's going to happen. So I got my foot in the door and got a little bit of experience. It was a flexible job and plentiful so if something didn't work out you could kind of find the next best thing. But ultimately I found myself working for a local pharmaceutical company, or a division of a large pharmaceutical company that was here locally, and that was my career for the next fifteen years or so.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what was that place called?

Tom Sullivan: At the time when I joined it was called American Home Products and it changed its name to Wyeth and then was bought by Pfizer.

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They make Robitussin, they make Chapstick, they make Lipitor, they make Viagra, so a number of behind the counter things that are huge, billion-dollar drugs and then stuff you see all the time at your average CVS is a smaller part of the business but that's what was made here in Richmond.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Tom Sullivan: All the Chapstick in the world is made in Richmond, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. That's good to know. [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so while that's going on how did you get into—'cause you started in homebrewing, correct?

Tom Sullivan: I did, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Was that even on the radar while you were working at the time?

Tom Sullivan: Well, I had homebrewed a little bit in college, but it was not a successful experiment or three so I kind of decided it was easier to buy it. And there was a local brewery here. I started because I couldn't buy beer, I was eighteen, but they would sell you the stuff to make it, so I thought it'd be cool if I just made my own beer.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Really? Oh, wow.

Tom Sullivan: Legend Brewery had a little home brew shop in their brewery, and they thought it was hilarious and they talked to me about brewing. So I did that for a little while. It was a lot of work and being young and busy with school and everything else about young adulthood it kind of fell to the wayside. And then when I was, like, early thirties I just needed a hobby. Too much of my life was about work and I needed something outside that was challenging and intellectually stimulating and interesting. My wife and I went to a tour of Monticello just on a Charlottesville kind of quick getaway weekend and they had a section of the tour that talked about how much time Jefferson spent trying to figure out this problem of beer making and the investments he made in onsite brewery, et cetera.

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And then we were sitting kind of down the hill after the tour, and we were drinking Sam Adams out of some tin cup. It was, like, the old inn. I don't know if you've ever been to it?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: But I just thought it was a damn shame that I was drinking Sam Adams and the people in the period dress and everything. I was, like, why don't they just make a colonial beer and serve it? So a week later I had my first home brew kit. I found every article about colonial brewing I could find, and I started experimenting, and that was the beginning. And my wife, thankfully—we live in a small row home in Church Hill and was very supportive of my silly

hobby as it took up more and more of our small house until finally I was quite serious. I was making fairly high-quality home brew at that point.

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I stumbled across some people who were trying to start a co-op and kind of the idea was the same, it's like, let's pool our collective resources and get out of our own kitchens, our own house, stop annoying our wives or girlfriends or whatever—or who knows –

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: —and let's do something a little bit more serious. And so a dozen or so people kind of pitched in. We bought a half barrel SABCO system which you may have seen. It's like converted keg home brew.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Tom Sullivan: It has some cool little automation and integrated pumps and pretty high tech from the bucket and glass carboy kind of home brew brigade. And we rented a garage down the street in Church Hill that had water and plumbing and built a little cooler and started brewing there every Sunday.

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And as the years went on there were just a few of us that were there every Sunday, we were invested, we were continuing to put our time and money into this co-op. And a lot of people kind of got a case or two of beer out of it and just never showed up again. 'Cause it wasn't an inconsequential amount of money. Everybody was into it for several hundred dollars apiece, if not more, which is a lot for a hobby. We started the co-op in 2010 and by late 2011 we kinda had

a name, we kinda had the beginnings of a partnership between three of us and a couple other people who were supportive. Named ourselves. We had to. We were going to our first craft brewers conference, and they require that you give them your brewery name.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

Tom Sullivan: So we had a deadline, we had to decide on a name, and we settled on Ardent because that invoked a passion for what we were doing but it also had kind of a pre-prohibition tinge to it in the sense that even some codes still read the prohibition of ardent spirits, the regulation of ardent spirits. It was kind of built into that prohibition language, pre-prohibition poems and treatises. And we just kind of liked that. We started off making beers that were recreations that you couldn't go out and buy. No one was making them anymore. It was a big piece of what we were exploring and that really seemed to fit. And it was the one name that none of us severely hated out of the ten options so we kind of compromised down to, okay, this is the one I can live with.

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We went to the conference, and we were, like, well, if we hate it we'll just change. It's just a conference. And by the time we got back it was just our name. So after telling everybody what we were up to for a week it just kind of clicked.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Tom Sullivan: But yeah, that's kind of journey from home brew to co-op and deciding that, hey, maybe we should do this; maybe we should make a go.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you come across some of these—it sounds like you dabbled in a lot of either historic or older recipes. How'd you come across these?

Tom Sullivan: A lot of just searching on the internet. Thankfully by that point, 2010 or so, there was a fair amount of interest in digging up some of these things. And some books had been published, *Brew Like a Monk* had come out, *Wild Brews* had come out.

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The Brewer's Association kind of once a year was making sure they were exploring some section of beer history that's—it wasn't lost but it was kind of hard to get to materials and certainly the documentation that was available was open to a wide interpretation. So it's not like really we're ever going to get—just talking about a mixed culture fermentation in Europe, the Belgian guy wasn't gonna tell you how you'd get it. That's just not how that culture works. They're like, I make it. You know how to make beer. Make it your way.

Sarah Rodriguez: Of course. [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: Just, like, do you, dude. I'm not going to tell you what I do. Which was a culture shock 'cause as Americans we're, I think, generally, yeah, I'll tell you what I do. And certainly that has been the case professionally in this business that people are very open with information.

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So yeah, I was reading everything I could get my hands on, which was fun. I was used to technical documentation at that point being in the tech sector so getting into technical brewing felt very easy. It's half history, half science. And in a town like this and in a small homebrewing community going to the James River Homebrewers club and talking you realize after you've

read the fifth or sixth book you're probably the best informed on a particular idea in this group of people. Even professionals who make beer all the time didn't have time to read everything about mixed culture brewing that was available and then spend all their free time experimenting. They went home after their day of making beer and probably had a glass of wine and focused on something different. [Laughter] So it was eye opening to go to a craft brewers conference at that point, even a homebrewers convention.

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And there's an expert on the stage and people are standing up and asking these questions and you're, like, I want to know the answer to that. And the guy's, like, I don't know, man. When you figure it out here's my email, call me or write me, because that's a really good point you just made; I don't know. And so it really felt like after being in a technical field where everything was sort of settled, no one was going to invent the next—well, the smart phone was on the horizon—in the [19]90s it did not feel like you were going to be in a tech startup that was going to become the next Microsoft. That was kind of behind. Google had already happened. So I don't know, there was something appealing about you felt like you were—even though the craft beer movement was probably midway through it's second cycle in that we had gone through the nineties and then the washout in the early aughts.

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And the industry was growing again by 2010 even though we had the great recession and all of that, craft beer was growing, I just felt like we were still on the ground floor or something. You could go back to Richmond, Virginia, and there was one craft beer brewery in town. It was Legend.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Tom Sullivan: So you felt like you could make a mark, so that was very exciting, an exciting time. And, like I said, it was just getting to the point where people were really working hard to uncover all of these things so there was plenty of room to explore.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's really cool. That's exciting. Do you remember some of those early batches either when you first homebrewing as a teenager or when you kind of went back to it, do you remember what those were like? Did you like those batches? [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. The stuff I tried in college, we don't need to talk about that. It was terrible. I did not know what I was doing.

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Thankfully, again, there was a lot more information available when I was in my thirties so you could read several pretty great books that stepped you through, hey, do this first and then maybe try something else. And so by the time you're on your third batch you're, like, okay, I can watch football on a Sunday and make an extract beer on my kitchen stove in about four hours. That's pretty cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: And then, a year later you're making whole grain, full grain, whatever you want to call it, but basically grain all the way to glass and you're kegging your own beer. But that's several layers of understanding and more investment in equipment.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: But yeah, I remember those beers well and it was just so exciting, your first batches you ferment, it finishes, you put it in a bottle with a little bit of priming sugar and you wait two weeks.

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And so it was just like the greatest feeling two weeks later to know you could pop your first bottle and test it. 'Cause until then you had no idea if you had succeeded. Of course, now we know at each step kind of what to expect so it's pretty easy to understand how it's going and where it's headed, whereas your first batches in you have no idea. You're completely blind. And basically pale ales and IPAs, I tried saisons, was really interested in the idea of a farmhouse ale, again, it being kind of as close to like Europe had to kind of what the colonialists here were trying to duplicate. What can we grow on the farm? And beer's a great way to preserve something that might rot otherwise. We can turn it into food that's liquid and it's safe.

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So I love playing with the farmhouse ideas that were coming out of France and Belgium. Again, that connection to history really excited me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: And they were weird. They were technically different than your standard ale. It fermented at different temperatures. They needed slight tweaks to the process in order to get the right outcome. So that was fun. And started sharing those beers around, got good feedback. And before I knew it, it was just—oh, that reminds me. I had a friend at the time, good friend, who bought an outdoor pizza oven. His wife is Italian, had a home still in Italy, and he'd gone over

there a number of times to see relatives with her, got very turned on by this Neapolitan pizza, and it was impossible to find on the East Coast unless you were going to go to New York or some big city.

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And so he bought an outdoor wood-fired pizza oven and so we started something called—was it Pizza Tonight? No, Pizza Club. And so once a month we would get together, she would make doughs, he would fire up the pizza oven and I would bring home brew. And so we would eat pizza and drink beer and it was awesome.

Sarah Rodriguez: How fun!

Tom Sullivan: And she ended up starting a restaurant called Nota Bene –

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

Tom Sullivan: —that was kind of Northern Italian Food but started as a pizza concept and then, of course, we opened Ardent much, much later. So that was kinda how it evolved. It was kinda fun to be, like, go to the pizza party and people were bringing crazy ingredients, reading up on weird things you could do with pizza. It's just garlic and marinara. That's all it is. There's no cheese on it. What?! [Laughter]

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And then, on the other hand, I was, like, hey, here's a roggenbier. This is a rye wheat beer that used to be made in a certain part of Germany. And people were like, what?! So it was just fun to experiment. It was kind of a foody crowd obviously. At the time we were all in our early thirties to forties and so had a little bit of extra income to spend on nicer things like food and eating out.

And so it was a real fun way to get feedback on beer and to talk about what was happening and dream a little bit.

Sarah Rodriguez: Was this happening mostly in Church Hill or were y'all living in different neighborhoods?

Tom Sullivan: They hosted at their place which was in the Museum District.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Tom Sullivan: And yes, I was living in Church Hill and brewing in Church Hill—well, for Pizza Club that was before the co-op so that was late aughts, I'd say.

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And then, ultimately I think Pizza Club kinda folded up when she got serious and started up her business. And by then the co-op was going so I was brewing and sharing all the beer on those Sundays with whoever came in. But it was cool. Before we knew it the co-op—do you know that area? I haven't told you where the garage is; of course you wouldn't.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: Do you know where Sub Rosa is?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yes.

Tom Sullivan: And The Roosevelt is right across the street?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: So we had started before both of those businesses had settled in and we were in this place that is now a little shop. It's called Dear Neighbor.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Tom Sullivan: It's a little gray building that was just a carriage house essentially for the house in front of it. It is directly behind Sub Rosa.

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So we would kind of open our doors every Sunday at 8:00 a.m. or so, start brewing, and then by the time The Roosevelt opened maybe a year later and was a blockbuster success, waits for brunch and everything, so the guys at Roosevelt would be, like, hey, it's a forty-five-minute wait. Go down and talk to the Ardent guys, have a beer, see what they're doing, and then come back and check in with us and we'll have a table. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: So we kinda ended up being the waiting room for The Roosevelt. And then, a year or so later, I'm not exactly sure when, Sub Rosa opened. Basically we would get there in the morning and they would feed us breakfast 'cause they were super early riser baker crazy people, and then they'd be getting done around three when our batches were finishing up and we'd pour them beer. So it was a real cool corner community for a while. I have very fond memories of those Sundays and so many people that would just drop in just 'cause they were curious.

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They were, like, have you heard about the crazy guys in Church Hill that just brew and then give away their beer? So we just met this large cross section of foodie Richmond over the course of

those three or four years that we were making beer in that garage while we put together the plan for this. But yeah, that was super neat. So that was from 2008 to 2013, like from first batch of beer to, like, okay, we're folding up the garage and we're moving everything to Scott's Addition 'cause we're ready. So it seemed like a long time then, but it really wasn't in retrospect.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Especially in the lifetime of this place here now.

Tom Sullivan: Right. Right.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about that process of transitioning? What made you choose this location?

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You already mentioned to me but if you could mention again kind of what this space used to be and why here, why this space?

Tom Sullivan: Well, at the time we were looking in 2012, 2013, we had decided that we were gonna do it. It was super scary, and we didn't have any money or the knowledge to do anything properly probably.

Sarah Rodriguez: And this was with Paul and –

Tom Sullivan: Kevin.

Sarah Rodriguez: —Kevin? Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: So Kevin had moved here with his soon to be fiancée, now wife, Molly [sp]. She had gotten a job at The Martin Agency. He was an assistant brewer at the Cambridge Brewing Company in Boston, had been a professional brewer, and so was kind of looking. We found each

other and he and I really hit it off. And Paul was a blogger, foodie kind of guy. He was very extroverted, kind of like, I'll be the sales, I'll be the face. And we were, like, fine, just let us make beer.

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And at the time, Scott's Addition was kind of a forgotten corner of Richmond. I knew it from my days in college and post college where this is where artists and anybody who needed space to make noise or make a mess or to be left alone on the cheap, you would come to this neighborhood because it was mostly tradespeople who were going to operate from 7:00 to 3:00. This is a dead zone by 4:00 p.m., so you could come in at night and make as much racket—and literally we rented places here and the landlord's, like, don't burn it down, son. Just, like, don't care what you do, just don't burn it down.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: And we were VCU students, we were, like, sweet!

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: So I, ten, fifteen years later, had that in the back of my mind.

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It was still very much that neighborhood. Certain corners had started getting renovated and such, but it was still wide open. We looked at a couple different places. One I liked that was kind of near the railroad tracks. There was also some problems with the uses. At the time, Richmond City zoning didn't understand small craft businesses very well. They only understood, like, it's a brewery, it's Budweiser, so it's got to meet all these criteria that would put it in what was called

an M2 designation. And that's like we were making hazardous smells and noxious fumes and so you had to be—if you were near heavy rail you were gonna be fine.

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So there's very little M2 in the city. That's why Hardywood's original brewery is where it is. They kind of found this little sliver of M2 that they could sneak into that wasn't too far away from The Fan and downtown. Scott's Addition for the most part was M1, which is light industrial instead of heavy industrial, a lot more expansive uses like bakeries and things that were a little bit closer to what we were doing. And at the time we just made the case to the head of the zoning board and wrote up a letter. We got some information from the brewer's association about what a craft brewery is and why they think the designation should be such and we made our case, and they changed it. And that expanded the number of buildings that were available to us.

Sarah Rodriguez: So they changed the categorization of M1?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. They changed the allowed use in M1, and they included craft brewery up to a certain amount of production.

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Basically, it said, like, you're under fifteen-thousand barrels a year you can be an M1, which is fair. And so that really opened up the possibilities. Kevin and Paul really liked this building. I liked the one away from the tracks because it was bigger, had taller ceilings, was better suited for growth in a brewery. And basically then were kind of in the process of raising money and going back and forth and trying to figure it out. And our first investor groups that were interested were

just, like, no. The one dead center of the neighborhood they were, like, that's the one. And I was, like, uh . . . And Kevin and Paul were, like, we told you. So I lost that but, of course, it's been awesome here.

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It wasn't difficult to twist my arm because that building over there is still kind of—it's where the new Veil taproom and stuff are going but it's gone through a lot of renovation, and they've knocked down some stuff. So it was going to be kind of in the corner of nowhere. Even though it's in Scott's Addition it was kind of a—like Brambly Park. Have you been back to Brambly?

Sarah Rodriguez: Not much.

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. They got a lot of land back there but you're driving to it and you're, like, am I in the right spot? And then you got to their parking lot and you're, like, oh, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: It was kinda like that. You're, like, where am I? Oh, cool, we're at . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm. So a different kind of section of the neighborhood here . . .

Tom Sullivan: It felt like you were getting lost a little bit and you were going to end up surrounded by burning tires or something. So this was just a little bit more open, it was central. Almost sightlines to Broad; not really, but sightlines to Boulevard. Yeah, we just thought that was cool.

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The big part of our—there's so many little things that influenced this—the big thing that was driving the business model and why we were able to get people's attention and ultimately to convince them to invest was the SB 604 passed and we were allowed to have a taproom. And we were probably the first project in Richmond that—that law existed right as we were starting to write our business plan, or it was passed right as—so we kind of had that fully baked in from the get-go and that kind of was a lot of the driving force to, like, location was really important versus the previous projects that came before us like Hardywood, as a good example. Legend obviously chose their location based on what was happening way earlier.

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But Center of the Universe, Strangeways; I think we were the fifth or sixth one to open but I think we were one of the first, if not the first to have—people are gonna come to us and we've got to create an environment that's comfortable versus, like, we built a brewery; let's put some picnic tables in the parking lot on Saturdays. So we got to build that in so when people came they were, like, oh, this feels like—it enhanced the experience. It was a beer garden and there was garden, not just asphalt.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Tom Sullivan: So that kind of drove the selection of the site. But ultimately the opportunity we thought was in Scott's addition. After some wrangling with zoning we got the use we wanted. And we're city guys. We wanted to be in the city. We didn't want to go out to the county even though it might've been a little cheaper, would've been easier to deal with Henrico County than Richmond City, ultimately we were, like, no, we've gotta be somewhere where we would want to hang out. We're city guys.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: So that's kinda how we arrived here at Scott's Addition.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember opening day?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Tell me about it.

Tom Sullivan: Whew, man. I had to take a Xanax. I was gonna die.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] What year was it again?

Tom Sullivan: 2014, June.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Right.

Tom Sullivan: And we signed the lease on this place with the developer, so they did the shell and then we built the brewery, and we signed that in June of 2013. So it took us a full year to get open. We, of course, thought it was going to be four months, which I think will be a common refrain if you ask, how long did it take you to open your brewery? People are, like, hee, hee; we thought it was gonna be this, but it ended up being this.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: It doesn't matter if you are a brewer and have worked in breweries, you don't build a brewery very often.

0:39:03

And there's a lot of engineering that goes into it that never gets thought about again. As soon as it's in place and it works no one ever goes back and asks you what your gallon per minute out of your chiller is gonna be and whether or not you've sized the pipes right. And where do we need traps and where do we need check valves? And what density concrete do we need to put these tanks on top of so that they don't crack the floor? So there's just a million little decisions and no one bats a thousand. We talked to every brewer who would talk to us about the mistakes they made, and people were very candid and there's lots of funny stories about it. I went to a class held by Seabold in Chicago, How to Start a Brewery, and they had a whole afternoon where people came in and just told you about how they screwed up their engineering of their brewery, and it was hilarious, and what they learned and some pitfalls.

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And even with all that help and information and sharing we still made mistakes. So heading into opening day when you've gotta put a flag and say this is when we're going to open, but you don't know if you're going to have beer or not, it's extremely stressful. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: So by the time we got there we had three beers finished out of the four. That's a whole other story. And we opened and we did a soft opening, friends and family, and that went well. And then the doors were open, and people were kinda coming in. We had brand new staff that we barely knew. We hired Lincoln, our taproom manager, and maybe three front house staff, and me and Kevin and some of the co-op members were, of course, around still and helping.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool.

Tom Sullivan: But yeah, it was just terrifying. And then it was just okay, we were just done.

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I remember it went well and we were down here, and I got advice from the Triple Crossing guys 'cause they had just opened two months before us.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

Tom Sullivan: They opened April 2014; we opened June 2014. And they gave me advice, they were, like, have more cash on hand than you expect because people just show up to these things and expect to pay cash because they don't want a shit show of credit card and waiting and they're just, like, [makes sound]. So we did that. We took their advice and kinda had a little streamlined system but at the end of the night we came down here with my wife and we just had literally a trashcan full of cash. And we were just sitting here, and the assistant manager came in and was, like, "All right, so what do we do? How do we reconcile this?" And I was, like, "I have no idea. I don't know what we just did. I just don't know what we sold. I don't know where the money goes now." 'Cause I had only thought up until that point.

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It was, like, get open, have good beer, and everything else was, like, well, how do you run a business? I was, like, I don't know! [Laughter] So that was funny, and I had a good night's sleep for the first time in weeks and came in the morning and opened up my computer and figured it out.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: But it was fun. A lot of support. We had been in that co-op for so long we had really done a lot of grassroots building of support with people and so we really had a great turnout and a lot of warm feelings right of the gate, so that was cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: That is super cool. Could you talk about kind of past that point over the years, what were some of the challenges or successes that you weren't anticipating? Any that kind of pop up in your mind?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. It's just such a mixture of things.

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The learning curve is really, really steep because not only are you making things, you're a small manufacturer of a food product, which no one really tells you about beer. So you've got all kinds of safety, the engineering of the chemicals that we have to use, making sure that everybody understands now that there's temperatures and pressures and forces and weights that are deadly now. This is not a bucket that you could just pick up. If you open a tank at a certain time you could create a really dangerous situation. These chemicals—it's nitric acid that we're passivating these tanks after—the tanks get manufactured. You have to use a certain protocol to get all the welding grease and various things that they go through to get the tanks made once they're in place, and it makes really dangerous stuff. So from that to how do I deal with my wholesaler?

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What are the rules? I don't have a sales team. How do I forecast how much to make? Where is it going to be sold? What's important to the wholesalers? Our biggest partnership decision and I have no idea how their business works. I just know from the retail end—I know how restaurants

buy from a wholesaler but there's the inside baseball of how that gets done, what gets prioritized. How do you get your wholesaler's attention? How do you make them give you focus? 'Cause they've only got a small team that's selling this, and they've got X number of products. How do you put yourself at the top of the list?

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Tom Sullivan: So there's the wholesale side. It's a hospitality business so are things flowing in front? Are our customers coming in? Even if we're happy with the beer, is the rest of the experience good?

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Is our staff trained? Do they know how to explain things? Are they good at hospitality and do they have the right skillsets? And then there's the event side, takeovers and you've gotta have an anniversary party, and you're releasing this beer for the first time. How do you get word out? And social media was kind of crazy at the time. We could post something on Facebook, and we'd get six thousand likes. It was nuts. There was no ads. You couldn't spend money on Facebook. It just existed. And so we'd be, like, here's me and Kev cleaning out a tank, and it would just be, like, 72,000 people just, like, yay! It was crazy. That's changed a lot. Now it's, like, fifty-three likes because they monetized everything. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Tom Sullivan: So learning all of those aspects—and there's only three of us.

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And before long Paul realized pretty quickly that he wasn't going to be able to do it, so he bowed out before we officially opened but was still around and on our board for a long time and eventually he sold his shares and moved on. Kevin was our head brewer for two years and was responsible for a lot of our early success in terms of recipe writing, beer ideas. And he got very sick. He didn't know it at the time but discovered after taking some time off to figure out his health that he needed a liver transplant. And it wasn't beer, it was just terrible family history and luck.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: So he is now post-transplant and has a kid and him and Molly are in Boston living their best lives. So he's completely out and so now there's one. [Laughter]

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And my role going into this was I was the IT manager guy, so I was going to run the business side. I was going to figure out the accounting and the taxes and the books and the software and all of that. And so for the first couple of years I did that but then it was, like, other hats. Okay, we've got to build a sales team. How do we do that? Well, I've got to find someone to run the brewery 'cause Kevin's not well. Okay. So I need to get my brewer hat back on. And what's the latest and greatest ideas? What do we need to be doing? How do I get this person up to speed? And before you know it five years is gone and you're just, like, okay. In between all of that we renovated this place from—you had asked what it was. It was a moving and storage warehouse that had been vacant for a dozen years or so and there was cats living here. They were not happy that we were moving in.

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And taking that from a shell and then not only just getting those first four tanks and our brewhouse in place but each incremental thing, learning how to run a business, like how does debt and collateral work? We raised all this money via equity and when we started this if you asked me the difference between equity and debt I wouldn't have been able to tell you. But we raised all this equity from investors. They just gave us cash. And from there on we didn't want to go back to the well because then you're talking about what percentage of the business do you own? You don't want to give up anything so it's better to do debt. And when you're a craft brewing business and you're at capacity immediately and you need to put more tanks that are pretty expensive to not only just buy but commission to make them work properly you can't go to a bank and be, like, hey, we've been open for six months and we need to grow.

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They'd just go, come back in two years. And thankfully we had some very supportive investors that gave us loans. So figuring that out, raising that money, getting the new gear, installing it, figuring out what to do with that new capacity in terms of how to shuffle it around and what to focus on. Yeah, I know that's the super boring part of the business but that's where the rubber really meets the road is when I see these people that are growing so fast and they're in multiple states and they just built another brewery, I'm, like, where did you get the money? And how'd you convince somebody to let you have control over that much if they're giving you that? It's such an interesting negotiation of how the capital for something like this—it's a very expensive business. Very capital intensive.

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There is a saying in the business that everyone's undercapitalized. Doesn't matter if you're Dogfish Head or little old Ardent, everybody needs more cash for more things to make the operation run better. And there's five good ideas at any given time and you've only got the money to do one or two of them. So that was kind of the early days. And then, of course, creating exciting ideas, having cool label artwork, all of the things, it's very overwhelming when you've only got an organization of—from a management and running perspective there's only four people doing it. That's a lot of things for people to do and especially when you started up you have three legs on a stool and then you just have one, you're hiring people or you're relying on other professional resources that are probably more expensive than someone who came in as an equal partner and was a sweat equity partner kind of.

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So a lot of setbacks, a lot of challenges because of life happening. But we got through it, and we grew at the same time. I feel like we represented ourselves well that when we had internal dramas or challenges nobody felt it outside of these four walls. The beer still flowed. It was still well made. Our customers for the most part were happy with us. And that was kind of how we rolled until COVID. We thought 2020 was gonna finally be our year.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Tom Sullivan: It's, like, we have all our tanks, we had plenty of capacity, we had great staff that was trained, and we were just ready to go and then it was, like, womp-womp. And I know that happened to everybody. It's not a poor us thing, the whole world suffered. But it was kind of funny, I guess, for our business and that was when we made our big push.

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We had finished installing everything and 2019 was all kind of the end of the road in terms of preparing to run at full speed and then immediately tripping just like that, but with everybody else. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Could you talk a bit more about that time? What happened with Ardent and with y'all during the beginning of COVID and how did you pivot or how did you get up after tripping and falling?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. We pivoted and we rolled and—I don't know. Yeah, it was weird. It's interesting reflecting on that time because everything happened so fast and so slowly at the same time.

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A day sometimes felt like a week because you'd wake up in the morning with one impression of what was going on and go to sleep with an entirely different notion of what the next couple weeks or months were gonna bring. And I remember in talking to a friend who owns a restaurant in town, Longoven, there was just kind of like waves or realization washing over everyone who owned a business and who was directly affected from closure standpoint what was gonna happen. Just kind wave after wave kept coming of, like, oh, my God! It started as, well, business is gonna take a hit. Then, like, well, yeah, let's make it as safe as possible. Let's get some hand sanitization things and let's get 'em out there. We ordered those in January. And the guy laughed, and he was, like, "Be glad you did 'cause they dried up by March."

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And then, let's start wearing gloves and masks. And let's just advertise that we're doing things. And then, in talking with some of the fine dining folks I just mentioned, they were kind of the canary in the coal mine because they're so used to looking weeks out at reservations, they saw it coming 'cause their books were dry in several weeks forward. So they kinda had this future right in front of them and nobody was planning a birthday party three weeks out on March 1st. There was no first week in April bookings at Longoven, whereas first week of February they were full, or at least on certain days.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

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Tom Sullivan: And I went in on the last day, they were, like, we're closing.

Sarah Rodriguez: To Longoven?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. They're, like, it's not safe. It's getting crazy. The stories were worse every day. The numbers on the Department of Health site were just spiking.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Tom Sullivan: And he's, like, the business is already gone, dude. And he's, like, we can see it. Nobody's going to come. I can open my doors but for what? And I sat there and had a beer and had a snack and talked to them. And that was Friday and by that Sunday I was calling the team going, "We're closing."

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Tom Sullivan: So whew, that was tough.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Yeah. I remember it was very quick.

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. In just, like, 48 hours it was, like, wow. And then, thankfully we had kind been working on other things just being pragmatic, not thinking, like, well, we're going to lose a portion of our business. What can we replace it with?

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

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Tom Sullivan: So we reached out to the ABC [Alcoholic Beverage Control] and said we want a delivery permit. And after going back and forth going, hey, I need this fast, and they were on it. They were really trying to help people without ignoring law but within their constraints they were truly trying to help. So by the time we got—I think we were one of the first ones to get a delivery permit—and they just made it by right 'cause everyone starts calling, like, we can deliver beer to someone's house? And people aren't leaving their houses. So we closed that Monday and Tuesday or maybe it was Wednesday we started our delivery thing, and the people we had just essentially laid off by that weekend I was calling them saying, would you come back?

Sarah Rodriguez: You were canning by this point?

Tom Sullivan: We got our canning line in January of 2020.

Sarah Rodriguez: No way!

Tom Sullivan: Um-hm.

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It was pure happenstance. But again, we were set up to run. We weren't mobile canning anymore. We had our own canning line, and we were going to crush 2020. 'Cause the logistics of the mobile canning is tough. You're at the mercy of their calendar sometimes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: But just having that in our own hands . . . So yeah, we took some beer that was going to go into draft or had been put into draft and we put it into cans. We had a growler machine, so we started taking the draft beer and selling growlers for delivery and for pickup. And we had a little tent out there, had these remote stations where you didn't have to touch anything, you could use your own phone and order beer and we were able to get that kind of figured out quickly. My IT background definitely came in handy.

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It was, like, how do we do touchless? Oh, my God! And so very quickly we were able to get about 50 to 60 percent of our business back just in people driving by, curbside pickup. I can't remember how it all got laid out but week by week we were figuring out a little easier, a little bit better way of doing it. And as people got farther into it and a little bit more scared the services just took off. So we were able to recoup a lot of that in just a skeleton crew in the brewery to keep things running and just whoever we could get out front 'cause it really wasn't hard. You were just handing them . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: People ordered online, the ticket printed out, you put together their order and just hand it to them. But I will say one thing was nice is I got to leave the house and come here. That was a really big thing for mental health.

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My wife's a professor at VCU and so she's teaching all online and was literally in our little, tiny Church Hill house. It's, like, I don't know how she would've taught, and I would've done anything without us killing each other.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Tom Sullivan: So it was nice to have a place to go that was safe. And it's a large building so we weren't working on top of each other, and we'd mask up and be safe. And then, yeah, we just kind of little by little figured it out. And we did do the food pantry. That was crazy.

Sarah Rodriguez: And the food pantry was for service industry workers, food industry?

Tom Sullivan: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: [inaudible 0:59:55]?

Tom Sullivan: Yes. So we closed that Monday, the 16th of March, maybe.

1:00:02

Sarah Rodriguez: Something like that.

Tom Sullivan: It was mid-March, and it was a week before the governor's order that all restaurants close in Virginia. So everyone's done. And I got a call from a friend out of Harrisonburg, a brewer, Tim, who owns Pale Fire, and he was, like, "Hey, listen, one of my best

drinking buddies is a manager at Cisco, the food provider company, and they've got warehouses full of food and it's all gonna go bad. And they're looking for places to set up. They don't want to just give it to the food bank, they want to give it back to their customers. Would you consider opening up your taproom" –which is now closed—"to become a pantry essentially?"

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We were, like, "Fuck, yes. That's awesome." So we decided that we didn't want to do what Pale Fire had done in Harrisonburg which is literally they would give you a bag and you could walk around and shop and fill up your bag and leave. We decided that, no, we're going to do it with technology. So we started a website called, I think, Ardent Helps. And we put basically the inventory online and said, "Please be respectful. We want to help as many people as we can." And the orders would come in and we would pack them, and people would come pick them up. Cisco delivered to us, I want to say, three or four times in pallets of food. Pallets.

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And Performance Food Group did one huge drop. And so for two weeks or so, ten days, me and a bunch of volunteers just packed orders and gave away food to affected folks. It was incredible but also very depressing because you just realized there's this huge hole and there's no way to fill it. The free food's gonna run out. We were exhausted trying to do it, but it was important that we did.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: But there was no way that—our business was barely hanging on. Even if we had five places in Richmond that were doing exactly the same thing it still wouldn't fill the hole. People were just completely without means to buy food.

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So we talked to the food bank after that and they were, like, we don't care how the food gets to people. If you guys want to run a pantry we'll help you. And so we went and talked to them, and they were just—they knew going in, coming in there, like, do you guys realize how much work this is? And we were, like, we do know. And they were, like, all right. Well, here's how it kinda works on our end and here's how we can help you. And we just left, Lincoln and I walked out, and we were, like, there's no way we can do any more. So we folded it up and focused on just keeping Ardent going, delivery, and week by week kind of trying to find ways to make it through. And then by June the City of Richmond and the Department of Health had come up with rules under which we could open and operate.

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So we focused on how does that work, and how can we make that work? Thankfully, we had this outdoor area. It was June, so we were able to put tables out and put together a system that honored all the rules and kept things organized. Yeah, it just seemed like for a full year we just didn't know what was going to come at us next.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: There was new opportunities. I think the authorities, if you will, were trying very hard to find ways to navigate the pandemic but also allow people to survive, either save their

businesses or make a living. The supply shock started to roll through so if it wasn't, like, hey, we've got the beer garden, income is back! That's cool, right? Oh, shit, we can't get cans.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Tom Sullivan: We need cans! [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: It's always something.

1:05:00

Tom Sullivan: And it was like that every month. It was, like, good news, bad news. [Laughter]

So it was a lot.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: And then, I think, one of the other things, speaking of community that was really difficult, everything opens up and now we're policing. We're cops. We've got the mask police and all these rules to follow. And I don't blame any restaurant that didn't enforce things because we did, and it was difficult.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Tom Sullivan: And there was a lot of various information that was floating around. If you go out there right now it's kinda hard to tell who's conservative, who's liberal. It's just a big—and that's how it had always been. We're in the hospitality business. We don't really care. We just want to make you happy.

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We want you to enjoy our product, create a great experience that's memorable and you'll come back and see us again. And then, all of the sudden we're, like, "Sir, mask. Sir, mask." And they're, like, "Pfft, fucking mask." And you're, like, "Dude, you got to. We could lose our license if we don't enforce this." And when you take a person whose life is in hospitality and you try to make them enforcement, it doesn't work. Their brains aren't programmed that way.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: And on top of that, they're terrified—this is pre-vaccine—people are terrified they're putting their lives on the line. It was individual by individual but people on both sides of the equation were already so on edge. They were being pushed in so many areas of their lives. A few had kids at home. What the heck were you gonna do? How were you gonna work a job even if it was online when you got three kids running around the house?

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So everybody is super stressed for a lot of very understandable reasons and so if you're just that last person that was, like, "Hey, man, you can't sit there," they were, like, "Agh, just give me a beer!" And then there's the anti-maskers and that whole thing. And so we did the best we could. We had a reservation system. We spaced tables out. You could order and pay for your table. But it was weird because we did the best we could, but it still wasn't enough. And when you set a certain level of service, like, oh, you have reservations? You're going to run like a fine dining restaurant now? No. No, we're still a brewery. We're still kind of bad at that sort of level of organization. People were, like, "Well, you have reservations. Fucking get your shit together!"

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And you're, like, "Well, okay, but the person who understands the reservation system is sick today so just bear with me." And so people, their patience was—and so the odd ones started this or nasty email every once in a while. Every business gets them. I mean, we were just getting them all the time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Tom Sullivan: And it was impossible to keep—'cause our staff was losing it, too. Sometimes they did get bad service 'cause somebody was having a really, really terrible day and just shouldn't have been here. So that was difficult to navigate. And all of the controls that we put in place to try to make things smoother had their own downsides. So once we got out of the following April and most of our folks were vaccinated and in the city was pretty good, counties people didn't really care—I'll let you interpret why [Laughter]—we took a lot of those controls out.

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We put tables closer together. You didn't have to wear a mask if you wanted to go to the bathroom. And everyone just sighed. It was just, like, so relief, even though I personally believed that we all had a duty to each other to create public spaces that were safe for everybody, I was just exhausted at trying to be the person that was in charge of enforcing that reality, 'cause there was a lot fewer people that truly cared than I would've ever expected. So that was kind of like some of the good things we were able to do. We also felt like there was a lot of confrontation during that period. A lot of people really appreciated the effort but not everybody really got it, and there were a lot of people who really, really were intent on letting us know that, for whatever reason, we were wrong.

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And that was hard. Being in a hospitality business, spending a lot of years trying to refine something where really you are trying to make the best quality product you can, you're trying to create the best experience, a connection to community, real love, and man, just to get punched in the face every day, it was, like, why am I doing this? And that, I think, explains a lot of the stories that we've been seeing for the last year. Why is there this talent drain in the hospitality business? That's why. Why can't they get nurses to work in these hospitals anymore? Everything that drove them into those professions was—I don't know if assaulted is the right word but challenged, maybe, during that period.

1:11:00

So I'm sure a lot of people have chosen other paths that protect them from those kind of forces maybe in the future. But anyway, sorry for the editorializing.

Sarah Rodriguez: No. I think that makes a lot of sense, and you were seeing that every day.

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. And we just want to make our beer, man. Just, like, don't yell at me.

[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Sure.

Tom Sullivan: All I'm asking you to do is put a piece of paper on your face from there to there. That's it. Come on.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Right. And as we're—'cause we're about to approach time—kind of switching gears a little bit as we're wrapping up, can you think of any specific beers that you've made here or home brewing or with the co-op that you're particularly proud of? Any that

stand out in your mind as, like, well, we thought that was gonna go well and that really didn't?

[Laughter]

1:12:02

Any that are particularly memorable?

Tom Sullivan: Man, we make a lot of beer. We make probably over forty styles a year. We experiment a lot and it's kind of like asking a musician, what's your favorite record?

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Tom Sullivan: Any given day it probably might be some variation of several different answers.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Tom Sullivan: But obviously, the first successes are always sweet when you're running after something and chasing after an idea, and it turns out fucking great. It's just such a good feeling for that week where everyone—you come in you're, like, dude, you gotta try this. And they're, like, yes, I do! That's what it's all about at the end of the day. Sometimes it's even funny, being down here in the hole, not up there in the brewery, and they'll taste and package something and I'll be, like, oh, I didn't taste it. [Laughter]

1:13:05

Why didn't you guys tell me we were tasting it? Because that's the real fun of it, no matter where you are in the business and what your responsibilities are it's, like, when the beer is finished and they're packaging it, it's an exciting time to get up there and kind of all taste it together. But yeah, and just silly things. When we got the canning line and kind of got it set up for the first

time we were running pilsner we all crushed a can just, like, right there, right off the line. That was awesome! But in individual recipes it just changes. We did an imperial milk stout and put it in rum barrels. And I don't know if you know this, but rum barrels were the last stop on the barrel train, so we got bourbon barrels and they're American oak.

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They get filled up, emptied, and sold to Europe. And then, the Europeans use them for whiskey or cognac or whatever. And they get used up for twenty years maybe depending on what's getting put in them. And then they get sold to the Caribbean and the Caribbean fill them up with their stuff and they sit out in the open, like, literally, maybe there's a lean-to. Literally, weather, everything hits them for a couple years and they don't even debung 'em, they just bang a hole in 'em, empty 'em, put another bung in it. It's crazy. So these rum barrels came in –

Sarah Rodriguez: You use those?

Tom Sullivan: We got rum barrels, and they came in and I was, like, oh, my God. It looked like they'd been in someone's garden for twenty years. And you're, like, those are rum barrels? And we opened them up and smelled them, we're, like, yep, those are rum barrels. And we filled them with the imperial stout, and they started leaking 'cause they were just dry and terrible quality.

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So we got 'em all straight, rehydrated the wood, and shimmed some of the rings so they'd stop leaking and then four months later we emptied 'em and it was fucking magic. It was so good. We lost one barrel to infection, so it tasted kind of tangy and tart and we knew it was going to continue to go a pretty bad direction, so we dumped that one. But man, I mean, when we were

tasting that it was just fun. Like, every time someone came in I was, like, try this and just watched their mind get blown. They're, like, what did you do to me! I was, like, yeah, it's rum and ice cream and chocolate and it's just so good. And then, I think the stuff I look forward to the most are maybe things we only make once a year that I really like so it's a full twelve months since I've had it last. Like, our Italian pilsners particularly. I don't know, I just love it. So every May I'm, like, when's it done?

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, waiting.

1:16:01

Tom Sullivan: Yeah. But almost ten years now or longer in the home brew world it's kind of hard to put my finger on any one thing 'cause some of those early successes seem like mole hills, not mountains now.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's great.

Tom Sullivan: That's what I have for you.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome. Is there any final thoughts, final stories that are in your mind or anything?

Tom Sullivan: No. It's cool. I think we're in a cooling period in the industry and so it'll be an interesting couple years to see kind of what's happening. I think we survived and got to grow in a very forgiving time where a lot of our mistakes were glossed over by just the feeding frenzy that people had for craft. All things craft, really, cupcakes to beer to biscuits.

1:17:02

So I think it's going to be interesting to see if there's, like, a settling out. I'm not expecting anything crazy unless another pandemic—that would be bad. But if things continue to go through their normal cycles I do think that there's going to be sort of just quiet closures and a shifting of the industry as things aren't quite as easy and the fundamentals of the business need to be sound, and they aren't always. Even if you have a talented brewer do you have somebody that's running the business that's keeping an eye on everything? Or you've got someone who's amazing at running a business but not good at developing talent in the brewery or relationships outside the brewery that allow you to sell beer through wholesale channels, whatever. All of those things are potential weaknesses that we all have.

1:18:01

And I think the people who are making great beer and who take the business side seriously will be fine, but I do think that there's people in this business that, if it wasn't a hot thing, would've gone into real estate or would've done—and that's going to happen. People are going to be, like, well, that was fun. Guess I'll go back to where I can really make money. And kind of this happened already. I said there was a second wave of craft that washed out in the early aughts. You've already seen this, that people got into it 'cause it was a trend, there was cash there, and they didn't focus on the fundamentals of what this is which is high-quality product, well-run manufacturing business, and creating an exciting and engaging brand.

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Each one of those in and of itself are difficult things to do and all three have to be done well to really make it work. So I do think that's coming and it'll be interesting to see how it shakes out.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Tom Sullivan: I hope my favs make it. I hope we make it. But after the last three years I think there are many people in this industry that have a lot more, pardon the pun, sober kind of take on what our futures are because there's just not an explosive growth in every direction. It's, like, no, careful, measured, well executed is the way to make it in the future. We'll see where that takes not only the scene, but I think craft beer in the US.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a good point for sure. Well, thank you so much.

Tom Sullivan: Well, thank you.

Sarah Rodriguez: And thank you for the beer.

Tom Sullivan: You're welcome.

[End]