



Brian Nelson

Hardywood Park Craft Brewery

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here at Hardywood West Creek in—where are we technically?

Brian Nelson: We're technically in Goochland.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Goochland, Virginia. And do you mind introducing yourself and tell us who you are?

Brian Nelson: Sure. My name's Brian Nelson. I'm brewmaster for Hardywood.

Sarah Rodriguez: Perfect. And could you share your birthdate for the record?

Brian Nelson: Sure. My birthday is November 18th, 1977.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And tell me a bit about where you were born and how you ended up eventually getting here to the Richmond area?

Brian Nelson: That was a good question. All these questions got me thinking, like, some things I hadn't really thought about in a while.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure.

Brian Nelson: I was born just outside of Chicago in Hinsdale, Illinois. That's where my parents were at the time. And then my father's job moved us down to just south of Richmond in Brandermill area of Chesterfield County. And so Brandermill was where we landed when I was about three years old.

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It was a great little community, lots of bike paths and walking paths, pools all around, nice wooded area. The developer that was doing that at the time which my dad was kind of seeking out, they kept awesome old growth trees, so you had a lot of the shade, a lot of things like that that was really nice about that, and schools really close to us.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: But yeah, so that was kind of the start. And I lived up until college in that same house and then just after college my parents built a new house when I moved out, of course.

[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Now is the time.

Brian Nelson: Exactly. My two older sisters moved out already. They were already in college and as soon as they got rid of me, yeah, they got a nicer place. But it was a great childhood growing up. It was good neighbors. I think I found my best friend when I was about three or four years old, he moved in next to us, which was awesome.

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His name's John Gardner [sp]. He passed away actually in 2020 which was unfortunate, but yeah, he was my best friend up until the end of high school.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Cool.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. It was pretty cool growing up. We would just run around the neighborhood. It was just go off, come back at dinnertime, go out again if you want to, come back in. So it was very fun.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. And tell me a bit more about your family at home, like what did your parents do? Tell me about your siblings and that kind of thing.

Brian Nelson: Sure. My mom was a third-grade schoolteacher.

Sarah Rodriguez: Your third-grade teacher?

Brian Nelson: She was not my third-grade teacher.

Sarah Rodriguez: Ah, I see.

Brian Nelson: She went to Watkins Elementary which is down in the Chesterfield County area. After I was, I think, out of elementary school she then started teaching. But yeah, thirty-five years and retired from the Chesterfield Public School System. Actually, my mom and dad met over in Germany where she was doing some teaching over there on base and my father was a captain in the Army.

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And they met over there and then came back to the states—I don't even know when that was — and started a family. But yeah, she retired after thirty-five years and that's basically all she did for her lifetime was teach, which was great. My mom's name is Sharon [sp], my dad's name is Jim [sp]. After the Army he got out and worked in some logistics coordinations for Mobile and chemical companies and moving those things, trafficking them from point A to point B, rail, trucking and oversaw that side of things. And became one of the vice presidents of logistics at his final position here in Richmond. He also passed away in 2020 so that was kind of a rough year for that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure.

Brian Nelson: But yeah, we're doing well now.

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But yeah, as I said, they met in Germany, had lived outside of Chicago. My two sisters, they're both older than me, my oldest sister, Michelle [sp], she's now living in Bangor, Maine, and doing some teaching on an Air Force base. And then, my other sister, Julie [sp], who's about three years older than I am, she's living down in North Carolina, down in Raleigh right now, doing some physical training and things like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. So as you were growing up in this family, what was food like at home? What were the meals that y'all were eating? What was the culture like around food?

Brian Nelson: It was certainly a everybody's at the table kind of dinner, so I try to replicate that with my family. But sometimes when my dad was out of town my mom would cook this wonderful sugary dessert dinner of crepes and just roll 'em up and we would have that for dinner.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really. That's great.

Brian Nelson: Some fruit puree, some sugar in between. But we never had that when my dad was in town.

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It was always kind of meat and potatoes. Snuck in some fish and things like that every now and again. My dad put on a pig roast every year. Once we'd gotten to know the neighbors we'd put

on pig roasts outside and just have this nice little cookout the whole day and the neighbors would come over and just have a wild party. But that was one of the memories I do have, which I've tried to replicate that, too, at my house here and haven't done so for a couple years because of obvious reasons.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm. Sounds fun.

Brian Nelson: Yep.

Sarah Rodriguez: Was beer in your house growing up? What was your exposure to beer early on?

Brian Nelson: I was actually a pretty good kid through high school. I don't think I drank until maybe late senior year and into college.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, really?

Brian Nelson: You know, that was my first little taste. I'm sure that's probably not—not sure to put it on record. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: We've all done that.

Brian Nelson: But no, beer was not ingrained in me.

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My dad drank beer, but it was the normal Miller Lites, Busch Lights, those types of beers. He liked bourbon, which was fun, too, but I never got a taste of that until later, later about that.

Yeah, wasn't a big beer emphasis in the family or nobody was a brewer and nobody was, like, hey, try this craft beer. I think the one time I visited my sister, Julie, out in Vail, Colorado, she

was doing some teaching out there, athletic teaching or was doing some sort of internship, and my buddy and I flew over there and did some skiing and everything else and she introduced me to Fat Tire, the New Belgium. And I was, like, whoa, all right, that's cool! So I think at that point some flavorful beer that came in at that point trying to seek out different things other than just the baseline major macro breweries that were in there.

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But I didn't get to really get into it until senior year of college, so actually doing home brewing. My wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, her sister bought me a book for Christmas, and it was *The Joy of Homebrewing* and Charlie Papazian is the author. And everybody that I know of has read that book as far as a home brewer or brewer and got me started in that. It was something that I was—I just wanted to keep doing it and doing it and doing it, probably too much 'cause I was trying to pawn it off for birthday gifts and Christmas gifts. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Everyone knows what they're getting from Brian.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. You're, like, all right, here's a six pack of beer if not more. But yeah, kinda cascading and after college my wife and I were living in Dayton, Ohio, and I was working for Honda Research and Development outside of Columbus, but I had to make a long drive. But yeah, I was home brewing there, looking to get into—just to shadow a brewer.

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There wasn't much out there at the time but tried to work into it. But then we finally moved to Columbus just after that and that's really where—I was working at a home brew shop; I was shadowing a brewer on my way home from work called Elevator Brewery.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Brian Nelson: And just trying to work my way in, get the foot in the door and see what happened. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. And where did you go to college?

Brian Nelson: Virginia Tech.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. I got a mechanical engineering degree at Virginia Tech.

Sarah Rodriguez: That sounds helpful.

Brian Nelson: Oh, it's super helpful, yes. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Great. Kind of earlier on did you know that you wanted to go into brewing? What did you want to be ideally when you grew up?

Brian Nelson: As long as I could remember I wanted to build and design cars. And part of that comes in the formative ages, when I was twelve, thirteen my dad bought a project car for us to, over the course of three years, have something I could drive when I turned sixteen.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Brian Nelson: And it was a little Triumph Spitfire. I don't know if you've seen those. It was a little convertible. Little English, British car similar to what he was driving and tooling around in in Germany with my mom.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, right.

Brian Nelson: So he was kind of nostalgic about it, as well, and we just tore the thing apart, put it back together, and had a box of extra parts that we didn't ever find a home for on the car.

[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Uh-oh.

Brian Nelson: But we got it running when I was sixteen and it was a great, fun little car. And that kind of—I was, like, all right, this is cool. I like to get my hands dirty. I like working on it. I think I changed the transmission out of that thing probably twenty or thirty times during high school just because it was just awful, awful. [Laughter] Those cars are notorious for having bad transmissions, bad electrical systems, and all of that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Brian Nelson: So there was a lot of on-the-fly troubleshooting.

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But yeah, I would take it apart and put it back together and it would drive. But that kind of furthered my ambition to build and design cars, I guess. And so out of college having a mechanical engineering degree I was hired by Honda Research and Development which was all future model CAD design.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

Brian Nelson: I did a lot of the body parts over the course of—I think I worked there seven years. Did all the stamped sheet metal designs from fender to back quarter panel to just about everything in the shell.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Brian Nelson: Did lots of safety measures for crashes and things like that and troubleshooting, and then working with the other departments for electrical and engine and all sort of stuff like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool.

Brian Nelson: I loved it at the time. It was a lot of computer work, not necessarily hands on kind of thing, so that I think I got a little tired of, I suppose, and kind of like, all right, I'm kind of in a rut.

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My wife got an opportunity with her job down in New Zealand to transfer over there and so we actually picked everything in Columbus, sold our house, sold our cars, and moved over to New Zealand for—we were there about a year and a half.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. What was that like?

Brian Nelson: Oh, it was awesome. It was awesome. That's my favorite, I think, excursion time period in my life. It was kind of a changing point of, all right, I don't have a job now. [Laughter] I quit my mechanical engineering job at Honda, went over there and did absolutely nothing. Well, I did a lot of running, I did a lot of soccer. I joined a soccer team over there and for three

months it was, like, okay, this is great! And then wintertime, our summertime here, their winter was just rain all the time so I'm, like, I can't be outside. I can't be doing all this sort of stuff. So I started knocking on doors of brewers that were in town and ended up shadowing one of the brewers at Galbraith's Alehouse which is in Auckland, New Zealand.

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And the brewer there, Ian Ramsey, said, "Hey, want to learn about brewing? Come over, shadow me for a day." It was a full twelve-hour day of brewing. And after that he decided he wanted to hire me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice!

Brian Nelson: So I was assistant brewer but also working behind the bar, as well. That was kind of the tradeoff, and so slinging beers. It was an English cask ale pub, so they had all the hand pulled, hand drawn beer so it was all cask conditioned. Super cool to learn that style of beer and how to do that correctly.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: But yeah, ended up becoming the bar manager, also being the assistant brewer, so I probably worked way too much there, closing down, opening up, the whole nine yards.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Brian Nelson: But was able to get some of my own recipes and beer styles out there in the taproom, which was fun.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's cool.

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And remind me again when you got into home brewing and how did you come across that?

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You said that you got a book?

Brian Nelson: Yep.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Brian Nelson: It would've been 2001. I graduated in 2001.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Brian Nelson: So college was five years for me 'cause I did kind of internship co-op. So I worked in the aerospace industry, worked in the automotive, and then that helped me get the Honda Research and Development job for sure. But yeah, 2001 was probably where I started, like, oh, you can actually make the stuff? You could actually design, you could actually—you go off of kits when you start. And then I jumped immediately into recipe development, into all grain and building equipment for it and making sure it was safe for the house, and my wife's not gonna get mad at me if I have all these boil-overs and stuff which is typical for any home brewer that's out there. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Brian Nelson: In New Zealand I even got a little home brew kit that I was doing at the house beyond doing what I was at the brewery, too.

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So yeah, that progressed on until we got back to—we ended up coming back to Richmond. We kinda had, where are we gonna go? We don't know. Denise's [sp] job, she was going to switch again to find a new employer as well after that New Zealand stint and it was kind of opened up. And I was, like, you know, I've got a lot of friends in Richmond, my parents are in Richmond. Why don't we just go settle down there and see what happens? It was an awful time to come back 'cause it was in the middle of the recession.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Brian Nelson: It was in that [20]08, [20]09 time period so jobs were hard to find, especially in the brewing industry. And the only two breweries at the time were Legend brewing and then Extra Billy's which was a brewpub down in Chesterfield. And so I talked with both of them and, like, hey, you want to offer me a job? I just came from New Zealand doing all this, learned how to brew commercial beer. And they just weren't receptive, not hiring, which was fine.

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They wanted me to be a bar manager at Legend, but I said, I don't want to get back into that. [Laughter] I'd rather do the back of the house work and get into that. So ended up getting a mechanical engineering job locally here that did, ironically enough, quality assurance machines for the tobacco industry for, like, cigarettes. We made automated smokers and, like, puff and draw.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, how funny.

Brian Nelson: It is a very weird industry. I still find it extremely weird.

Sarah Rodriguez: Interesting.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. So it was kind of to make ends meet and kind of like, all right, well, I was back on the CAD and doing all the computer aided design stuff, components for them, but it was fun but not my end goal.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. How long were you doing that?

Brian Nelson: So it was about two years. Yeah, year and a half, two years. So my buddy, Brett Hunnicutt, that we went out to Vail back in high school came back.

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He knew that I was home brewing and all that kind of stuff, and he lives in Richmond, still does. And he had read something that there was a brewery that's going to be setting up shop in Richmond. And I was, like, oh, okay. And he said, "The name of the brewery is Hardywood, and you've got the two cofounders, Eric [McKay] and Patrick [Murtaugh], the names." He's like, "You should give 'em a call and go out and do that." And I was, like, "Yeah, I probably should." [Laughter] So I ended up—this was funny—during lunch break at the engineering job gave a call to them, kind of cold call, just gave them a little bit of my history. "Can I send you my resume? Can I meet you guys, whatever?"

Sarah Rodriguez: They haven't opened yet?

Brian Nelson: They haven't, no. They didn't have any equipment. They just had a shell of a building and that was it. And they had their little home brewery, which we still have, the twenty-gallon pilot brewery is what we call it right now, which we tested all our beers on.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, cool.

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Brian Nelson: But anyway, I talked to Eric and Patrick, and I sent them my resume. Didn't hear from them for probably two to three weeks. So I was kind of like, I don't know, maybe I won't hear from them but decided just to go down there, make a cold call. Took half a day off of work and went down to the building and just introduced myself, brought out a six-pack of home brew I was doing at the time, and just kinda said hey. We spoke for probably about forty-five minutes, and they were very, very nice. They were looking for a brewer to come get things started and weren't sure who to hire, how to go about doing it. It was a very nice conversation and so about a week or two later I think after Eric gave me a call and he was, like, hey, we tasted your home brew. It's really good. Why don't you come down and do a pilot brew with us and kind of get to know 'em a little bit better on a working level and brewing level, which was fun.

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So I did and, yeah, that kind of started it off from there. That batch we did, what ended up becoming our flagship when we opened, Hardywood Singel, which is a Belgian blonde ale. So I brewed it with them. I was trying to get in there and trying to impress 'em. [Laughter] It fermented out. They were monitoring that whole thing. And then they gave me a call. I think I was having a couple of people over to the house and they gave me a call and said, like, "Hey,

listen, why don't you come down and get out of the house and come hang out for a little bit?" So we did and they brought down a growler of the beer that we brewed and they're, like, "Taste this. This is what we wanted." So it was kind of that, all right, they're interested. And they offered me a job. It was part time to start out 'cause I was still working in engineering so I was kind of working as much as I can. And finally I quit that engineering job and started full time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Brian Nelson: And still without the equipment.

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We finally got that in and . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: You quit your full-time job without the equipment? [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Brian Nelson: Yeah, quit the engineering job and got a full time with Hardywood.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Brian Nelson: That was probably in May, I would say, May of 2011. And spent the summer after we finally got the equipment in pulling it off the truck, stood it up, and did all that ourselves, and I ended up plumbing the whole thing with water, all the piping going underneath the brewhouse and all the electrical to the pumps and sensors and all that kind of stuff. And then we ended up just barely making the brew date. And we set ourselves a target in October, October 22nd was the

day, and we had to have beer ready to go at that point. [Laughter] So it was pretty wild. I can remember we all were working probably sixteen, eighteen hours sometimes.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow!

Brian Nelson: And that was when my son was probably nine months old. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's intense.

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Brian Nelson: My wife, Denise, I can't believe she's stuck it out with me the whole time, again messing up kitchens and going out in the shed and brewing and spending so much time at Hardywood, 'cause it is a passion that I have and love this company.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. For sure. And could you tell me a bit more about that original site, like what the building used to be, kind of what your experience was, especially if you were there while it was getting built up?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. It was two things. That building before was, I believe, first some sort of manufacturing of HVAC equipment. Don't remember the name of the company at the time. And then it switched over to a warehouse or overflow for merchandising of malls and department stores. So you saw these little cabinets and mannequins and all this weird stuff that you walked in when it was dark and you were like, oh!

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You would see all these figures out there, so that was what it was. We got all that cleared out, took down just a few walls, but it was basically just a barren slab of concrete with a little office

space and storefront up at the front. And we did all the painting. Eric and Pat did the tile floor in the front of the space for retail space and cutting the drains in and epoxying the floors and all of this stuff before we got the equipment and set it up. So it was just a blank slate. It turned out after being there for—well, we were full time there probably eight years, and we maxed it out. It was just tanks everywhere, even more so than we had—well, we have more tanks over here, but it was just kind of in that space. It was 12,000 square feet with the office space, so it was pretty tight. And at that point we had, I don't know, five brewers on at the time.

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I was head brewer at the time and five other brewers, and we were working from probably 5:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Brian Nelson: That one we ended up maxed out there, which was just terrible on a whole level of workability and our employees' health and mental health and trying to work graveyard shift and rotate around, trying to do all these creative things to schedule appropriately. So we would just keep going.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. That's a lot to manage.

Brian Nelson: And this [the West Creek location] was in the works as early as 2013 trying to get the ball rolling of what we could, how much we could invest in it, what kind of automation do we want? Just kinda thinking of those things.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit more about opening day of the original location? Do you remember that day?

Brian Nelson: Yep. No, I do remember. I was filling kegs the day of. I do remember that. We were, like, all right, morning, we're opening up. I was filling kegs in the morning.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Was this before or after SB 604?

Brian Nelson: Before. Before.

Sarah Rodriguez: This was before.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. So we had a grand opening party, had an awesome crowd, and we had two beers—or three beers, the Hardywood Singel, our Farmhouse Pumpkin, and then we had our RVA IPA which we did just a small scale. We couldn't give out pints. It was only samples and to-go bottles in the shop there. So it was pretty crazy. A ton of people were coming in which was fun. We were chatting with everybody, serving these little sample cups, "Here you go," trying to do glassware but ran out of glassware. And it was a complete success in our eyes, and we were, like, all right, where do we go from here? Make some more beer, A), 'cause all we brewed kind of just out the door to bars and restaurants, just draft mostly.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. So you started distributing from the beginning?

Brian Nelson: We did, yeah. Yep. That was sort of the business plan all along was to go into distribution and not just be a taproom.

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When we contributed and fought for SB 604 that was kind of a tipping point for us from a customer standpoint but also for other breweries to open up in the same manner, to have a taproom sustained but not necessarily have to go to distribution.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Right. How much were you involved, what were you hearing about as the process of SB 604 happened?

Brian Nelson: Oh, very much so involved. It was Hardywood, Devils Backbone, Starr Hill. Legends was in there, too, that kind of contributed money but also walked on the hill and talked with everything we could, all the congressmen just to say, hey, listen, that this would be a beneficial thing. We had a sponsor. I don't remember his name at the time but to sponsor this bill to say wineries have this opportunity, why can't breweries have this opportunity to sell full beer glasses, glasses of beer onsite?

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So the governor came and signed the bill at our brewery kind of within the brewery, Governor [Bob] McDonnell.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, yeah.

Brian Nelson: Yeah, so I'm in the picture in the background.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] Very fun.

Brian Nelson: Thumbs up. We were doing a pilot brew at the time, too, so I was doing the pilot brew and talking to the governor on how we brew and how to do the things.

Sarah Rodriguez: How exciting!

Brian Nelson: It was nuts. Had a big crowd there too from all the breweries from Virginia, and that was probably forty or so breweries at the time in various spots dotted around Virginia. And I think we're over—close to three hundred now, three-hundred twenty-five, something like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's amazing.

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember some of those early—especially after SB 604—some of those early recipes you were working with? Could you talk through kind of some of that early evolution?

Brian Nelson: Sure. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: What you were interested in; what y'all ended up doing.

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

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Other than the Belgian blonde ale, kind of classic ingredients, going with just malt water, yeast, and hops. But then our next beer was this Farmhouse Pumpkin. It was using spices and used actually Virginia pumpkins that we processed and kind of cooked up in the mash tun. So it was very different from what I was used to with, like, how we're going to go about this. But I was, like, man, if we piloted the Farmhouse Pumpkin, it was absolutely delicious, something I'd never tasted before, I think we were, like, okay, this is something. And Gingerbread Stout came next as that creative brewing process where now it's one of our well-known beers across the country, what we're well known for, but at the time we were thinking about doing three different stouts,

going through and being, like, one with vanilla beans, one with cocoa nibs, one with something else. We couldn't figure it out.

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And by happenstance Bill Cox from Casselmonte Farms, who is our ginger supplier now from Virginia, he brought some ginger in just as a cold call and said, "Hey, listen, can you guys use —" he was just going around to restaurants in Richmond seeing how it could be used in culinary arts, and then came to us and said, "Hey, guys, can you use this?" And we're, like, "Well, what is it, first?" [Laughter] "What is it?" There's this huge thing like this with about three-foot stalks going everywhere.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Brian Nelson: I'm, like, "I don't even know what this is. Tell us about it." He's, like, "Oh, this is Hawaiian baby ginger. You don't have to shave off the skin on there. You can just use it whole because it's got this really translucent skin on it 'cause it's a baby ginger." It grew, like, huge hands of ginger and you had that white, green, and red color to it. And we decided, like, all right, well, what goes well with this? And I give credit to Eric on the concept of making gingerbread stout 'cause he was kinda like, all right, what's a good combination for a stout?

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Ginger and then it was, like, well, what if you add some cinnamon? Cinnamon and then we were, like, oh, add vanilla, and then we added some local flare with local honey, as well, to give it some more complexity and depth of flavor. But that was a trial and we've still got some pictures of this. It's hilarious. We were dosing all of these little cups of stout. We did a pilot brew on it

and, like, all right, what are we gonna do? This is this much here, this much here, this much here. We probably had twenty samples that we were just kind of testing and tasting and said, like, what amount are we gonna do? What amount is correct? And ended up at a place where we were, like, all right, we gotta go for it. We're going to try this out. We're going to just do one beer now. It's called Gingerbread Stout. Our graphics designer made this awesome label with a gingerbread cookie and a honeycomb in the back.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Brian Nelson: And we were just, like, oh, we're gonna go for it. And it ended up just being a massive hit, not only for the taproom, the people out in the market at that time, but we ended up that following year winning a bronze medal at the World Beer Cup in San Diego.

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So we were out there just, like, shocked. We were, like, what?!

Sarah Rodriguez: For this accidental recipe.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. It was kinda like we brought it all together and, yeah, that started 2012—that was 2011 we released it just before Christmastime.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, yeah. So that was early.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. It was late November. The only reason I remember that 'cause I went with my buddy, Brett Hunnicutt, to London to go watch some soccer games. We were watching the English Premier League, which was fun, but I had to finish all of the ingredient dosing before I left and came back to finished beer and was, like, okay. [Laughter] I was nervous coming in. I'm,

like, all right, how's it taste? And I was, like, whoa! And so we hit a homerun, but it wasn't till 2012 where word got out that we had this Gingerbread Stout and we released it—typically it was, like, the beginning of November is when we released it in 2012—we had just lines, lines out the door.

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I mean, it was lines wrapping around the corner just to get a bottle or a four-pack of these 750 milliliter Gingerbread Stout bottles.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Brian Nelson: So it was fantastic!

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome!

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's huge.

Brian Nelson: We were getting up on the roof and taking pictures and stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter] I love that. Could you talk about some of those early—I guess that's definitely a huge success. Can you think of any early maybe challenges or successes that you weren't anticipating that stand out in your mind?

Brian Nelson: Just keeping up in general. That was one thing. We didn't realize—in the business plan it was kind of steady and slow growth and then it was, like, whoa, okay. What are we gonna do? Well, let's get some more tanks on order.

Sarah Rodriguez: It grew faster than you expected?

Brian Nelson: It grew faster than we expected for sure.

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And we were on a trajectory, like, I don't know, we're going to be the size of Sierra Nevada here soon if we keep it up. [Laughter] That obviously didn't happen, but we got a nice brewery here.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: It was tough in those times. The distributors are always kind of a funny group in working with us, and they were working with us gangbusters from out the gate, and they started getting on more craft brewers and then we started getting diluted a little bit. So those challenges of growth and keeping us relevant, I suppose.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Brian Nelson: Even now I think—which is kind of endearing—I feel like we're the dad brewery of Richmond, kind of. Legends is probably the grandfather. We're the dad. [Laughter] It's one of those things, we're not the exciting brewery anymore but we brew fantastic and quality beer. That's kind of where we go from there.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's great. Could you talk me through the process of expanding here to West Creek?

0:31:59

You said that was a conversation pretty early on.

Brian Nelson: Yep. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Do you remember when that started happening and what drew y'all to this site specifically?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. We started—it was kind of, again, looking at that trajectory of what we were doing, how we were going to sustain it in that 12,000 square foot building. We added a bunch of tanks, I want to say it was probably 2014, 2015, getting the concept, getting some brewhouse quotes in, looking around at different places in Virginia. I think we looked at fifty different places.

Sarah Rodriguez: Like, all throughout Virginia?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. Yeah. Well, Richmond kind of bound. We looked at Hopewell, we looked in the Goochland area, and just areas downtown even, different buildings, different spaces that were bigger that would need renovation and decided that—this one kept on coming up. This space in West Creek kept on coming up just because—one of the reasons is it's close enough to Richmond but you get out here and you feel like you're out in the woods, further out than you think.

0:33:02

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: The Tuckahoe Creek was always very, very enticing to us to be, like, look at this. Nobody's going to be building back here. We could have this big background. It blooms in the springtime and looks awesome. So that was kind of the feel. And I think Eric, Patrick, Kate

[Lee], and myself—Kate’s our president—we would come out here and just kind of walk the grounds two or three—it was probably a half a dozen times during that process of, like, what do we think? What do we think? Why are these ticks all over my legs and stuff?

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: ‘Cause it was just wild. Stepping on snakes and stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: Was anything here?

Brian Nelson: No. No. It was just trees.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow.

Brian Nelson: It was just wilderness. There was a couple spots that were kind of cleared out, probably from logging or whatever it was. So we ended up doing—it was either before or after, I can’t remember—after we signed on here and did a little company retreat.

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All of our employees came out here and we set up a little bonfire and told stories and said, “Hey, what could we do better? How can we do this? This is gonna be a massive investment. What would you like to see?,” to our brewers and also to our salespeople, And that kind of started it off. And working with the architects and getting quotes on equipment and seeing what the budget was. And the building of this took some time and we had some gaps in that because of the weather and just, like, all right, we don’t need to be laying concrete in the middle of the winter. It’s not going to be good. So then we kind of waited until that got picked back up. It was a long process, three years, four years, before it actually got—turned it on in 2018, in April of 2018.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And you were talking to me that you were pretty involved in getting the layout of the brewery main operation.

Brian Nelson: Um-hm, yeah.

0:34:59

Sarah Rodriguez: What were some things that were important to you as you were going about that?

Brian Nelson: Yeah, that's a good question. We visited, in addition to visiting all the places where we would land around Richmond, also visited breweries we respected whether it was out of town. We went to Tröegs. I'd been to Allagash before. All these breweries that were bigger and established and had similar not necessarily motivations but just kind of like this is what it is. And we kind of gathered things from there. We wanted the brewhouse to be in the sight of customers when they come in just like we did back at our old building. You'd walk in the warehouse, and you'd see all the tanks and things like that. We even had bands inside the brewery, which was hilarious. I don't know how we got away with that. I was always imagining people just, like, opening valves and stuff like that 'cause they had it, like, within arm's reach.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: But we wanted that atmosphere to, like, surround yourself with the equipment and the process, the smells, the barley, the hops you smell.

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So that was part of getting the brewhouse on there but also seeing the tanks in the background, the cellar where typically it's—I wouldn't say typically—sometimes it's closed off; sometimes it's very visible. We wanted everybody to look down and be, like, oh, there's actually people doing something down there. I wonder what they're doing? Let's go learn about the process. I had to make the flow work from bringing it over here all the way to there and then sending it into the warehouse where we'd add the bottling line and now a canning line. But that whole process, again, however many iterations I'd had in my brain and sketched it out and drew kind of architectural drawings of what it might look like, and how there—and what our architects finally ended up on and this kind of barn building was the end product of it.

0:36:58

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice! And do you remember this opening day?

Brian Nelson: You know, do I?

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: I honestly don't. I honestly don't remember. I'm sure we had a party but—'cause I was onsite probably two months before dialing in the brewhouse, getting the fresh brews in the tanks, passivying [sp] all the stainless steel, making sure the process and flow worked.

Sarah Rodriguez: So you had been in here working for a while?

Brian Nelson: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And I was dumb. I shouldn't have done this, too. I was putting up, like, coolers and assembling stuff, all the grain handling I did with our maintenance technician at the time. Doing a lot of manual work which, again, I love but it was a bit much

again. And you know what was funny? During that time we had my second son, and he was probably two.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Brian Nelson: Is that right? Two, yeah. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: You wait until like the hardest part.

0:38:00

Brian Nelson: I know. I know. And yeah, he's a handful. I was kind of, again, just putting a massive amount of hours in here. Finally commissioned the brewhouse and did our first turns and learned a lot from that, how much more efficient this was but also the automation that was involved in it. And teaching Justin McCracken, our brewing manager now, and Rick Tambellini, who's still with us, as well, I brought them over to kind of write the standard operating procedures, how we're gonna do things. When we bring our brewers over now they're gonna have to learn from us and how to do this. It's a whole different method. It's still brewing —

Sarah Rodriguez: And they had been at the original location?

Brian Nelson: Yeah, they had been at the original location and just, yeah, everything is manual down there, so you have to be time [snapping]—dependent on the human being rather than this is kind of more automated. It's awesome, actually. You can start brews at two o'clock in the morning if you wanted to, schedule it, and then start another one when you wake up at six at home.

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It's all where you can do it remote control.

Sarah Rodriguez: No way! Wow.

Brian Nelson: And then, the next one you have to come in to, so you have to plan for that. But our brewers, we have a team of four right now, and that satisfies all of our volume, which is fantastic.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. For sure. And you've kind of talked about it a bit, especially as you were considering expanding, relying on what other folks have been doing, and then, of course, working with the different breweries on the bill. Could you talk a bit more about how you see Hardywood or your own experience engaging with the Richmond community, the brewing community, home brewers if that's part of what you've learned about around here? Could you talk a bit about how community plays into your work?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. Yeah. I think part of when Eric and Patrick came up with that business plan was making Richmond home for Hardywood.

0:40:05

And me being from Richmond that resonated, as well. So the pumpkins from Virginia, which was Grandma's Pumpkins, which is down the Midlothian Turnpike, which I lived very close to that. And getting pumpkins from there and working with Agriberry with the next fruited beer, which we did both with raspberries and blackberries.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, nice.

Brian Nelson: We did strawberries one time from them which we cut by hand.

Sarah Rodriguez: Whew! [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: Indeed, yeah. It was terrible. It was terrible when you look back at it. But we invited the community to come in, so we probably had fifty people just kind chopping and throwing into a bucket.

Sarah Rodriguez: No way!

Brian Nelson: But those types of things were always fun to start off with. Obviously, scale then it starts to become, all right, how are we going to do this on a bigger process? Which we still use all those farmers to this day in our beer.

0:41:01

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, yeah.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. But beyond that our relationship with James River Association, which has been for many years now—I can't remember when we actually started, probably 2013 or [20]14—where we designed a West Coast IPA, American IPA and named it The Great Return, which is the return of the North Atlantic sturgeon which was decimated in the James River back two hundred years ago or a hundred and fifty years ago and the population was almost extinct of that particular fish. But now all the work that the James River is doing to build breeding habitats and have all the stewards of the James River, we donate five dollars per barrel of that beer to the James River Association to do that. So that is very important for us 'cause the James River is our water source for our beer, so good water, good beer. That is something we still do and are very passionate about it.

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And that's one of our—other than Richmond Lager at this point is our highest volume so we had a lot of donations going to it, which is awesome.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Brian Nelson: But yeah, community events—we are always looking to do and work with—we do the markets, the Christmas markets and the farmers' markets and things like that to get the community involved. We always listen to their feedback, good or bad. [Laughter] It's always hit and miss but, yeah, we consider ourselves, I think, as a company very rooted in Richmond and in Virginia specifically. We've only just started to and are just starting to go to North Carolina. We were for a little bit but then decided it wasn't working out. We're going to stay in Virginia, we're going to go deep in Virginia and maintain that presence here. But now it's, all right, let's see about North Carolina, which we're expanding very shortly or hope so.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's exciting!

Brian Nelson: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. A lot of work.

0:43:00

Brian Nelson: Lot of work, yep. Hopefully. Hopefully. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. And then, that kind of leads me to my next question of what has it been like since you've been here kind of throughout the growth of Richmond's brewery scene?

What has it been like to see that growth and that change, especially maybe compared to what your experience was like growing up and being familiar with Richmond?

Brian Nelson: It's vastly different from when I was growing up, that's for sure. Richmond I think at the time was the murder capital of the world in the [19]80 and [19]90s, which was not a great tag line for Richmond. So even through high school my parents were, like, "Where are you going?" "Down to the hockey game," 'cause it was the Richmond Renegades. "Just go there, come back; go there, come back." And there wasn't as many festivals that I remember. I can't remember a single one. Maybe the Watermelon Festival or something of that nature.

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When I left Richmond to go to college and then in Ohio for seven years, then New Zealand for a year and a half, then coming back I was shocked at just how it'd changed in that short of time. And it's still evolving to be, like, a destination city for breweries, distilleries, restaurants, cideries, meaderies. All these culinary type of influences have been really great. And it's, I think, one of two cities in the nation that is by a river that has class IV, class V rapids.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Brian Nelson: 'Cause it's got sort of that adventure culture to it, as well. Which I used to do river trips with my dad and the family all the time back in the day. We'd spend eight hours on the river doing fishing and swimming and having a great ol' time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Nice. That's great.

0:44:59

Now, kind of speaking of things changing over time, do you remember what was going on with y'all and kind of what was your experience going into COVID, to the pandemic, both you personally and then as a business?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. I mean, personally, I don't think it's necessarily COVID related.

Obviously, we were on pins and needles. My two boys and my wife were, all right, let's be safe, let's be safe. Let's mask up and who cares what everybody says about that. We're gonna do that and be very diligent about that. But then shortly after or just at the beginning, my father passed in April, and April 20th, I think, was when they were, like, hey, we're shuttin' down. So that was a difficult thing to then get into all of this being inside for all the time and having—I don't want to get too morbid here but then my best friend, John, passed away not due to COVID. It was due to a suicide, which was very difficult to handle.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: We had two other COVID related deaths that were in our family, close to our family, family friends, and it was a lot piling on.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's overwhelming.

Brian Nelson: Yeah, it was. It was. But that makes me . . . sorry to . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: No. Take your time.

Brian Nelson: [pauses to collect himself] So how I combated that was throw myself into work.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Brian Nelson: So that seemed to be a good solution at the time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. I'm sure there was plenty to focus on.

Brian Nelson: There was. We had to go through some rough times of—at Hardywood we had to lay people off.

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That was kind of first actions. We tried as long as we could getting assistance from everywhere and doing that and just really, really as a senior leadership team kind of brainstorming on what we could do. Let's expand. Let's figure out what other options and it came down to, with the few people we still had on staff, and this was the time when we were still bottling beer and getting beer out to the market. That was still going relatively well. Not by the volumes it was prior to, but . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Brian Nelson: So I was down there putting bottles in boxes. We had to cut probably 75 percent of our production staff and say, hey, listen, we're gonna hire you back. We just need to get over this tough time. So yeah, it was all hands on deck. We were there from a senior leadership team both front of the house and back of the house 'cause a lot of our part-time workers for service and all the service staff, they had to be laid off as well—or furloughed, I should say, not laid off.

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We furloughed them. And that was a tough decision to make. Everybody understood it on the team. At that point we were, like, okay, let's brainstorm again. Let's figure out what else we can

do to keep revenue coming. And Kate and myself—I think it’s my idea, but we ended up launching into this whole virtual tasting scene where we would have beers set up—the first one was very, very just rudimentary. We had three beers. You can come pick them up or we could deliver them to you. It would all be virtual through Zoom, and we would spend an hour tasting these beers and talking about beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. All remote?

Brian Nelson: All remote, yep. Yeah. And so the first one was okay. I was trying to be goofy and all that kind of stuff and that didn’t really work out too well.

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So it ended up being the first couple others that started after that we started getting a good following and having forty people sign up both Friday and Saturday.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow.

Brian Nelson: So we did Friday night at, like, five o’clock and Saturday around four or five, those two tastings. And it ended up selling out the whole time. Beers went out there, but we ended up making it, like, a beer education type of scenario at that point. That was something everybody looked forward to from a customer standpoint but also I ended up looking forward to it ‘cause it gave us a little break from thinking about anything else and just kind of seeing other people’s faces, having a laugh at them. And some of our customers that are still part of our beer club—we call it the Family Tree—were part of that virtual tasting crew. So yeah, that was kind of the savior of—it was one of the things I looked forward to during COVID was that Friday or Saturday.

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And we did an immense amount of them. It was every week for probably—I don't know how many weeks total. I keep looking back at the slides and pulling information from the slides that we created to kind of teach our front of the house or some content we can put out in the market or those type of things.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Brian Nelson: So it was super fun. We ended up bringing in some people from Gearhart's Chocolate and the Truckle Cheesemonger and all these fun types of businesses to do a remote thing where then we would food pair beer with food and talk about those relationships and how it was. And otherwise just, yeah, the delivery—Tyler Thomas was our delivery guy, and he was all over Richmond. I mean, all over Richmond. It was good stuff, but it was difficult. It certainly was difficult. We ended up bringing—everybody who wanted to come back came back. It was about 95 percent, I think, of our staff came back once this thing started to open even though it was social distancing and had become creative ways on how to create that, both outside too.

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We drew circles on the ground and . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember around when y'all were opening up again and bringing people back?

Brian Nelson: I don't remember the date honestly. I remember we debated back and forth, back and forth, back and forth of what's the right thing to do. Are we going to get any backlash from

media or social media for being too open or not open enough or careful or not careful enough? But I think overall we managed it well. Now it's back to normal, it seems, which is fantastic 'cause it was a rough two years.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Brian Nelson: And we lost—oh, man, in 2019 we were 18,400 barrels.

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We dropped down to 16,200 in 2020. And then, 2021 was one of our best years, we were over 20,000, which was again—that's why we pulled everybody back and just were like production, production, production. And now we're kind of playing it off where we dipped a little bit last year, which is not good, and trying to figure out what that is. We're hoping this year is back on track to where we were, so it's kind of one of these deals.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure, for sure. What is day to day like right now for you?

Brian Nelson: For me? I've got a lot of screens here. There's a fair amount of meetings talking about just marketing and wholesale strategy, bigger picture items, what we're going for, what could be some opportunities out there. I'm working on some recipe developments and some other beverage developments to try to push that a little bit as another offering from Hardywood. We may be getting in some sodas and things like that, so it'd be cool.

0:53:00

Sarah Rodriguez: Hmm.

Brian Nelson: We tossed around doing canned coffee and all these different facets of beverage types of avenues to go down. So there's still opportunity there so that's kind of where my realm is at. And just managing production both sides, downtown and here. But our production director Tim Norman, and Andrew, who is our logistics director, our operations director, they kind of are running the show from down there actually making schedules and forecasting, making our master schedule and those types of things.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, that's good. Well, kind of speaking of forecasting, what are your hopes kind of for the future of Hardywood as well as the craft industry in Richmond?

Brian Nelson: It's hard to tell.

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I'd like to think it's going more, from a beer standpoint, towards lagers and German pilsners and our Richmond Lager, 'cause we do have three now flagships that are all lagers and doing great rather than IPAs or hazy IPAs, which I think are not necessarily falling out of fad but it's kind of getting, all right, everybody's making one. It's kind of saturated now. You can't differentiate between any of them anymore. And that's one thing. I hope to see what we've developed in our barrel program, to see that go different places and be a staple part of this company. We've got recognition from a lot of our barrel-aged beers and some of the barrel blends that I do. So that's something that I am passionate about to kind of keep moving forward. I don't know if it's gonna resonate on the market. These are 12 and 13 percent beers and high dollar, too, because they've been aging for a year or two years.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Right. That's cool.

Brian Nelson: It's fun. It's fun. And the other side of things is the NA [non-alcoholic] beers are starting to come into play, all the seltzers that, again, were a bigger fad I think is diminishing now. Over COVID I think it was huge and people just having fun with that, but it doesn't seem to be the sales are keeping up now. And the ready-to-drinks, the RTDs, that's the other kind of category that is causing us some competition out there to try to . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Tell me more about that. I'm less familiar with those.

Brian Nelson: So those are ready to drink, meaning you have a spirit in there, and most of it's sugar and, I don't know, some flavorings or something like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: People love sugar. [Laughter]

Brian Nelson: Yeah. It's funny. We were talking about this the other day as a team and we were, like, you know, the RTDs, what's going on with this? They're sweet, they're cloying, they're probably about 250 calories. And the seltzers, on the other hand, were very low in calorie. And so when people are switching there'll be some effects there. [Laughter]

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I don't know. But some of them are just sugar and stuff and it's probably pretty tasty. But that's the other thing that other breweries are leveraging into, or if they have a distillery are leveraging into. Devils Backbone, which is not necessarily craft anymore, they're putting out those types of beverages. We would have to have a license and everything to do that.

Sarah Rodriguez: So that would be like a whole 'nother project?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Brian Nelson: We are doing cider inhouse here and looking to get that into package very soon, as soon as we can get just shelf-life studies and things like that created and done. And we collaborate with Barboursville out in Charlottesville, their wine, so they make a wine for us that we kind of selected a blend just to kind of make some more taproom offerings. So it's under our label, Hardywood.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Brian Nelson: Lost Bird is the name of the wine.

0:57:00

Sarah Rodriguez: And how different is the actual making process with some of these other things? How much can you do with the infrastructure you already have?

Brian Nelson: We can definitely do it with the infrastructure for sure. Brewing is a lot longer process 'cause you have to work on yeast doing its fermentation thing and sometimes it's cantankerous and can take longer or shorter time. But the RTDs, if you have a distillery obviously you're making spirits but if you're just getting into the game you could buy drums of ethanol and just take a spirit and mix it up and blend it, which I'm sure some of these companies are doing. We could still do that here, again, if we had the license and everything to do it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. And then ciders and sodas?

Brian Nelson: And ciders and sodas are a similar process. A lot shorter. Cider has got fermentation so we can handle that. We have Sarah Mellen who's our cider maker and also one of our brewers. She's kind of leading up that charge and trying to get the best apples from Virginia and make that blend and produce some great cider.

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And the soda side of things, if we get really heavy into that, that's pretty quick turnaround from a materials to finished product.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. Very cool. So that's for the most part what I've got. Is there anything else you can think of? Any stories, favorite memories you've had, anything that stands out?

Brian Nelson: From the brewing industry or just in general? [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, I guess either. Brewing industry, from your own experience brewing?

Brian Nelson: Yeah. I think, again, my best important turning point in my life, I think, was going to New Zealand and experiencing that brewing education down there. That was kind of a turning point where the light came on in my brain, like, you know what? I could do this for a living. It just takes some motivation, and it takes some initiative to find the right spot. And I consider myself very, very lucky and I'm very, very appreciative of Eric and Pat to bring me on as employee number one.

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I probably don't say that enough to them, but it's been a fantastic dream of mine since coming back from New Zealand and even earlier to work in the brewing industry. I think I had grand ideas of having a brew pub and those types of things. I'm, like, I'm not the business guy.

[Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's true. That becomes your job.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. So I don't do as much of that. I'm focused on production and beverage quality and that facet of it.

Sarah Rodriguez: The stuff that it sounds like you're really passionate about.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. Yeah. But I don't know if I have any great stories other than our trips to—well, yeah, we had a trip to Craft Brewers Conference in Nashville where we had a pretty big delegation from the brewery go down there. This was probably 2017. And I had this grand idea, say, hey, listen, guys, whoever's with me, we're gonna drive from Richmond.

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We're going to go to Lexington, Kentucky, to go to some of these distilleries that we get barrels from and kind of learn how that process—and then make a dart down to Nashville and we'll stay a couple days there. Well, I got Kate, my partner in crime, she said, “Oh, it sounds like a great idea!” And Andrew [Edwards] and Tim [Norman], who are now running the production side, they thought it was great. So we drove out there and they're never gonna let me book any accommodation anymore because I got this great looking place online. It was a nice little rustic refurbished cabin. It ended up being a little bit outside in the sticks and kind of in nature, which was kind of fun, too. I liked that. And we got there, got settled down, we're having a couple

drinks and dinnertime came around, we're making dinner. And all of a sudden these mice start popping up and we're, like, oh, okay. All right. There's a mouse. It's out in the woods, whatever.

[Laughter]

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Sarah Rodriguez: There's a mouse.

Brian Nelson: There's a mouse. And it turned out to be just the worst mouse infestation ever and we were, like, terrified to sleep. [Laughter] But we did have good bourbon trail tours. We didn't want to stay in the cabin, so we were out and about the next day. And then finally we met up with everybody who flew down to Nashville. They made a trip up to Lexington. Then we did Buffalo Trace. Kate, Tim, Andrew, and I, we went to Wild Turkey. I organized all these tours.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Brian Nelson: And Castle & Key, which was, I think, one of my favorites while we were there which is, like, this weird old distillery that kind of didn't look like it was in process but they're refurbishing it, but they were still making bourbons and gins and stuff like that. Really cool place. Oldest and longest—or maybe it was longest—longest rickhouse in America which was, like, two football fields long.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, gosh.

Brian Nelson: It was nuts. You couldn't even see down to the end of it.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's amazing.

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Brian Nelson: Yeah, it was pretty cool. So those types of experiences. We always have fun going out as a company and going to Denver and San Diego, and Portland we went to. We went to Portland for the Craft Brewers Conference, and I think we spent maybe ten minutes at the Craft Brewers Conference. [Laughter] Otherwise, we were doing a big tour around.

Sarah Rodriguez: There's so much to see.

Brian Nelson: There's so much to see, so much to see, yep.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. That's great.

Brian Nelson: Those are the experiences that I remember from, like, just it's not work anymore, it doesn't feel like work. This scenario doesn't feel like work, either, although every day there's something going wrong.

Sarah Rodriguez: Especially I imagine on this scale, you can't avoid it.

Brian Nelson: Yeah. Yep. And I'm in charge of the maintenance department, too, so it's all hands on deck when something does go wrong. I'm in there trying to take something apart and put something back together and make it work again.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Brian Nelson: Thank you.

[End]