



Allan Sepkowski

James River Homebrewers

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Date: March 14, 2023

Location: Allan Sepkowski's home, Mechanicsville, VA

Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: 1 hour 2 seconds

Project: Tapping Into Richmond Beer

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

Allan Sepkowski: We're in Mechanicsville, Virginia.

Sarah Rodriguez: Mechanicsville, Virginia. It's March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Do you mind introducing yourself, tell me who you are?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. My name is Allan Sepkowski. My friends call me Shiny or Shiny Head and I'm known as Shiny Head Brewer and I'm a home brewer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And for the record can you tell us your birthdate?

Allan Sepkowski: I was born November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1962.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sweet. And could you tell me more about where you were born, where you grew up, what your childhood was like?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Well, I was the oldest of five, born in rural upstate New York in a down called Clarkson. And my parents lived in a trailer of sorts in a trailer park type setting.

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And I've got, again, four siblings, one brother and three sisters and we're pretty close together in age. In fact, my brother's eleven months younger than me.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow. Eleven months?

Allan Sepkowski: Eleven months, yeah. Some call it Irish twins, though we're not Irish.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: And at one time I think my mom had three kids in diapers at once. It was somethin' else.

Sarah Rodriguez: Strong woman.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. And what did your parents do for work?

Allan Sepkowski: Well, mom was a homemaker. She had her hands full raising two boys and three girls.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Allan Sepkowski: And she didn't go to work until I think my youngest sister, who's nine years younger than me, was in high school.

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So it was a while. She just raised us all and did a good job of it. And Dad worked in a factory, Kodak. They both came up from Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's where they grew up and were from?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. They grew up in a coal town and jobs weren't very prevalent back then. And Kodak was up and coming and there was other factory work, paper companies, St. Joe's, that kind of stuff. So he moved up here, started a family, and retired from Kodak when he put his time in.

Sarah Rodriguez: And what did your mom do whenever she went back to work?

Allan Sepkowski: It was funny. She went back to work for a fast-food company. At the time it wasn't called Burger King, it was called Carrols. It's owned by Carrols Corporation.

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But it was funny, we remember going through the drive through and there she was in her orange and brown and yellow polyester uniform with the big puffy hat. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: So she worked there and then she worked as a health aide and she enjoyed that probably more than anything, helping older folks with cleaning around the house, providing meals, sleeping overnight if the patient warranted it and whatnot. But yeah, she really enjoyed that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Cool. And, especially with your mom kind of helping raise y'all primarily through most of your childhood, what was food like at home?

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, my gosh. That's where I learned how to cook.

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Mom, I could just see her, all the time she was in the kitchen, always cooking, always cooking, 'cause there was seven of us to feed.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a lot of people.

Allan Sepkowski: And I sometimes would help her and sometimes would watch her do the cooking and then I would try my hand at something. I remember the first cake that I made was a

chocolate mayonnaise cake and I couldn't believe you were putting mayonnaise into a cake mix, but if you think about it it's eggs and oil, right?

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm. That's what you need.

Allan Sepkowski: So that made a really moist cake.

Sarah Rodriguez: It turned out good?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. There wasn't a day that went by that there wasn't a pot of sauce on, a pot roast, or a chicken cooking in the oven.

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Sarah Rodriguez: A lot of things from scratch?

Allan Sepkowski: A lot of things from scratch. She's German and we would eat German food. Every now and then she'd try to slip in liver, and she'd call it something else. "Oh, it's Swiss steak," or something. [Laughter] Wouldn't get by my nose. I'm, like, nope.

Sarah Rodriguez: No way.

Allan Sepkowski: Not eating it. Not eating it. But yeah, we had a blast doing that and so that's where I learned how to cook and ultimately led me to learn how to brew beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. And speaking of, how did beer factor into your growing up? Did your parents drink it at home? What was your introduction to it?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Dad drank beer. I think it was either Genesee or Black Label, one of those two, and he drank that for the most part out of the can.

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And then one day he stopped. He decided that that was taking over his life, so he became a recovering alcoholic. But yeah, for the most part it wasn't any—I remember him making a cider once, a hard cider.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really? What was the setup for that?

Allan Sepkowski: He had it in the crawlspace. [Laughter] I remember him talking about these things and looking at it and it looked horrible, but it was in this glass carboy type thing in the crawlspace. I didn't taste it. I don't know how it came out. But I do remember that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Okay. And did your mother drink beer?

Allan Sepkowski: Mom, no, she rarely drank.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

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Allan Sepkowski: She was too busy with the kids and keeping us straight.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. And so take me through kind of going through high school and then what happened afterwards.

Allan Sepkowski: Well, I'll tell you, first let's go back to my first introduction to serving somebody something that I made came—it was either middle school or early high school. And we were doing world studies and we were all challenged with bringing in a dish from a country that we picked. And I picked India, and I brought in curry chicken. My mom stood behind me as I did everything.

Sarah Rodriguez: Just to make sure.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah, just to kind of coach me through it.

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And I brought that in and those kids—not very many people were used to bold spices like that, especially at that age in that time, in the [19]70s, and they loved it!

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. And I was amazed. I'm, like, I could do this! Not that I had aspirations of becoming a cook . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: But it would build your confidence from that.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. And every kid dreams about being an astronaut or a policeman or fireman or something like that. I had those thoughts but never really—am I gonna really be a racecar driver? [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Allan Sepkowski: No. No. Not at all.

Sarah Rodriguez: Not at all?

Allan Sepkowski: Not at all. In fact, once I learned how to cook I became a line cook in high school and I was making money where my friends, they didn't have money.

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And I would have pocket change all the time because I was cooking two, three, four shifts a week.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where were you working at?

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, boy. Well, the first place I remember at that age was a place called Lum's. I don't know if it was a chain. I don't know if it was part of something or whatever but all I know was I started in there as a cook. And prior to that I was a dishwasher at this Greek restaurant in the mall and that's all I did was wash dishes. But the first job cooking was at Lum's. And then I went to a place across the street that was more popular, a family-owned place called Runds, Runds on the Ridge.

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And from there I just bounced around until I was making enough money. I went to college for a little bit, but I didn't matriculate, and I didn't really enjoy it. And the first job that came around that paid me more money, I took it, basically.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's fair. What was that job and, oh, I guess what did you start studying in college that you didn't really connect with?

Allan Sepkowski: I was actually studying food service but in order to get to that part you had to get through the hard stuff first. You had to get through the English and all the core studies.

Sarah Rodriguez: Hi, Dawn.

Allan Sepkowski: How was the omelet or the . . . ?

Dawn Sepkowski: Good.



Allan Sepkowski: Yeah? Okay.

Dawn Sepkowski: Hit the spot.

Allan Sepkowski: I put cheese on there and then, like, oh, she doesn't want cheese. You remember Sarah?

Dawn Sepkowski: I do.

Sarah Rodriguez: Hello. Thank you for letting me come hang out in the morning.

Dawn Sepkowski: Sure. We need somethin' to do. [Laughter]

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, look.

Dawn Sepkowski: Yay! It's awesome having a house husband.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's good to know.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. That's what I am now, I'm a house husband. [Laughter]

Dawn Sepkowski: Brings me breakfast, he cleans up the kitchen.

Sarah Rodriguez: Someone's gotta keep things runnin'.

Dawn Sepkowski: That's right.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. We're just going through some history, my early days in the kitchens.

Dawn Sepkowski: What's funny, when we first started dating and we'd drive around Rochester he'd be, like, "I worked there, I worked there, I worked there."

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Allan Sepkowski: [Laughter] Yeah. There's a lot of places that I worked, but I went where the money was and each time I made sure there was more.

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I knew what I was doing so . . .

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Nice. And so you left college. Where'd you start working, what was happening there?

Allan Sepkowski: I had an opportunity to go to work—oh, I can't remember the name of the place—and they were going to pay me, I think—back then 500 dollars a week was a lot of money.

Sarah Rodriguez: Around when was this?

Allan Sepkowski: I was late teens, early twenties, something like that. And they offered me the position to manage the kitchen, which it was a management job, but it was only during that shift.

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I thought it was going to be the whole kitchen, but it wasn't.

Sarah Rodriguez: Ah, I see.

Allan Sepkowski: Which it kinda rubbed me the wrong way a little bit, but then as I got older I'm, like, well, I would've had more responsibilities for the same money if I had. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's big, yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. So I wasn't the guy and I reported to a head chef, so I guess I was a sous-chef or whatever. Then I worked in Marriott and some other places, high-end places, and that's really where I honed my skill of cooking. And I attribute that all the way up to my brewing craft because I understand a recipe and I understand how things go together and whatnot from cooking. And I said, well, this will be easy.

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And it really was easy in the beginning, but I didn't make good beer. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Were you home brewing around this time or when did you start?

Allan Sepkowski: I didn't start home brewing until maybe eleven years ago.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, okay.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's recent. So you were already in Richmond?

Allan Sepkowski: I was already here. We heard of home brewing, and we heard of the little keg kits, Mr. Beer type things, and anybody's beer that we did taste, it wasn't that good. But we all thought, well, if we can learn to home brew we can save money.

Dawn Sepkowski: I don't know if that's really saving money.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Allan Sepkowski: Well, back then that's what we thought.

Dawn Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And I guess the more you get into it the more money you can spend.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Case in point, if you went and saw the brew shed.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Dawn Sepkowski: Yeah. That's the whole reason we built that large shed with the garage door was the whole idea for his brewing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm. For the brewing operation.

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Allan Sepkowski: Well, it started out as a party shed and it wasn't supposed to have a garage door, it was supposed to have those doors that open halfway and then you clip like this.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Yeah. And that creates an overhang.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Dawn Sepkowski: And the bar would be in there and everyone would be out here.

Allan Sepkowski: And the bar stools would be up front. But it didn't work out that way.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: Which I'm happy —

Sarah Rodriguez: It seems functional now.

Dawn Sepkowski: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: From what we've got, yeah, it's extremely functional.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome.

Allan Sepkowski: It's still a party shed.

Dawn Sepkowski: And we still have that tiki bar.

Sarah Rodriguez: So you're ready, you're ready for a party.

Allan Sepkowski: That's right. [Laughter]

Dawn Sepkowski: This is a very social and entertaining house.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. That's awesome.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And so how did you end up down here from New York?

Allan Sepkowski: After a while I got out of the kitchens, I ended up getting a job. The last job in the kitchens is where I met Dawn.

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I was working at a small regional hospital, we both were, in Canandaigua, New York.

Sarah Rodriguez: You were in the kitchen in the hospital?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. I was a purchasing agent or whatever they called me and then I would supervise the line and manage the cafeteria and she would come through and that's how we met there. But then I had a chance to sit on a committee that was part of a bigger group of hospitals and got to start networking with people and that's how I was introduced to food service

distribution. And once I made my connections this guy called me out of the blue and said, “Hey, I got a buyer’s position opening up. Do you want it?” And at the time it was paying more money than I was getting at the hospital and so I took it.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. And that was down here or no?

Dawn Sepkowski: Still up in New York.

Sarah Rodriguez: It was still up there.

Allan Sepkowski: It was up in New York.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Allan Sepkowski: It was up in New York, Canandaigua, New York. And then I popped around a couple food distributors. And then a friend of mine, a guy I worked with up there in New York, came to Richmond and was working with PFG at their headquarters in West Creek and they needed a category manager and one thing led to another. And after about a year or so I moved down here, in 2006.

Sarah Rodriguez: What were those early days like getting to know Virginia? Had you been to Virginia before?

Allan Sepkowski: No, never. I think I might’ve been to Richmond once with a buying group that we were part of, which turned out to be the same buying group that PFG owned.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow.

Allan Sepkowski: But I didn't recognize anybody. But yeah, it was fun. It was an adventure. We had two kids that we were raising, two girls, and we would find ourselves going here and there and trying to explore the place. But more than anything I was going to and from work, so it really wasn't a lot of exploring.

Sarah Rodriguez: Where was your office?

Allan Sepkowski: It was at West Creek, which is about twenty-five miles from here.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, um-hm.

Dawn Sepkowski: Plus, after about six months we plugged in with a church, so we started —

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Around here or . . . ?

Dawn Sepkowski: Yeah. Yep. Just down the street.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, nice. What church was it or is it?

Allan Sepkowski: Atlee Community Church.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: Christian church. And we got plugged in there and great church community.

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Great people. It's a kind of large congregation but we explored small groups. Dawn actually got into them first and I followed her and that was pretty cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do y'all still go?

Dawn Sepkowski: We go to a different church.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Dawn Sepkowski: But we were there for a long time.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: When the kids were younger?

Allan Sepkowski: That's when I started brewing and I had to ask myself, well, can I brew beer as a Christian? Is it against the faith? I did a little research and found out it wasn't against any rules or whatever on the Christian side.

Sarah Rodriguez: Any doctrine or anything.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. And from what I understand Jesus made wine. [Laughter]

Dawn Sepkowski: And drank it.

Sarah Rodriguez: You're right. [Laughter] Keeping with the practice.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

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And that's when I started brewing out in the backyard.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. What was your setup like early on?

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, the first setup I had was in here on the stove. And I remember I had read an article in the *New York Times* and this small startup company, Brooklyn Brew Shop, was



doing a startup and they would go to the flea market which is famous for startups. They go there and then they get seed money and then they grow up. And I was reading their story and they developed this one-gallon kit. It was all grain. And I said, ooh, I want to check that out. So I did some research. They had some stuff in retail and I found a kit at Whole Foods, as a matter of fact, and I made my first batch of all grain right on that stove right there. [Laughter]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember what the batch tasted like?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. It was a pale ale of some sorts and it wasn't great, partly because the equipment that was provided—it was an inclusive kit. You had everything except for the water. And it was a clear carboy versus a shaded, tinted. And I didn't really have anywhere to keep it, so I kept it in that closet with the door closed. [Laughter] So it was dark. From everything I read that's what you had to do.

Sarah Rodriguez: Is it usually tinted for that to kind of help?

Allan Sepkowski: You would need to keep it somewhere dark or have it tinted, I guess.

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I guess the carboys are not tinted but you have to keep them in a dark spot.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: But because this was never closed all the time I thought maybe the light got to it or whatever. [Laughter]

Dawn Sepkowski: Is that when you graduated to the cardboard box? [Laughter]

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, yeah. I had a cooler that came in that was insulated and I put it out in the garage, and I enclosed it and put ice packs in it to keep it at a certain temperature.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, yeah. Okay. That was kind of the evolution?

Allan Sepkowski: That was the evolution, and it turns out I went to Whole Foods to look for another kit and the clerk there said, “No, we don’t have any yet. They’re due in.” He says, “Why don’t you try the brew shop that’s in Lakeside.” ‘Cause my old manager, which is Tony Ammendolia, which is the owner of Final Gravity and Original Gravity, the brew shop.

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And I said, “Okay. I’ll check it out.” And they were having a big brew day the next day, and everybody came with their equipment, and they were brewing, and I caught the bug there.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, okay. Do you remember around when that was?

Allan Sepkowski: About ten years ago.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Great. Could you talk a bit more about getting to know people in the brewing community, some folks—you mentioned Tony [Ammendolia]—other folks who stand out in your head, what that was like and how you got plugged in?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. As a matter of fact —

Dawn Sepkowski: I gotta go back upstairs.

Allan Sepkowski: Okay.

Sarah Rodriguez: Good to see you.

Allan Sepkowski: —he turned me on to a group that I'm in now, the club, the James River Homebrewers, and they were the ones that were sponsoring that big brew day at this place.

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And I started going to meetings and the community is very welcoming, very open. As soon as I got there people were asking who I was, what do I do, what beers do I like to brew, drink, et cetera. And I really liked the camaraderie of the group and so I started coming to those. After a while I would make friends with whoever I was talking to and asking questions and trying to learn more stuff as I went along the way. I don't know who suggested it, but they suggested that I read John Palmer's book, *How to Brew*. So I read that and then I basically caught the bug, as they say.

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And I visited other folks' brew setups, brew days, tasted their home brews, started making mine and tweaking mine a little more. And the more I read the more I learned and the more I practiced the better I became. I have some awards on beers, but those awards are for the style of the beer and there's certain criteria, very strict criteria at times, that you have to hit. And if you hit all of those to a certain point then that beer is deemed to be a good beer, a very good beer, or an excellent beer. I've never gotten an excellent, but I've gotten good. I've gotten silvers and bronze for the efforts.

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And really I don't brew to get a medal because I really like to brew to what I like to drink. And I don't like all the styles but if I'm gonna brew something I maybe want to put a little extra particular hops in.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. To fit your tastes.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah, to do that. And then, it may go over the ABV so now it's out of that category.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Right.

Allan Sepkowski: I'm, like, well, still gonna drink it. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: Still had fun with it.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did you start entering your beers into competitions?

Allan Sepkowski: Oh, that's really cool. COTU, Center of the Universe, just had started and they were in their first year and they came up with—it was what they called a wort share.

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And it was a contest to make the best beer out of this wort that they gave us. And you could make whatever you want but you that was your base. And they raised money for, I think, a volunteer fire company or something that year. And we went there, we collected the stuff in the vessel. I think I had an old keg or something, one of those modified kegs, and I took that back and we stayed here, and we made this beer and we're, like, this is gonna be great! This is gonna be great! [Laughter]

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I took second place, and I lost out to this guy that made a Belgian beer that had these—oh, what's the—grain of paradise. If you don't know, they're very tiny and hard and some beers have them in there but in order to get the effects from the thing you have to crush the grains.

Sarah Rodriguez: Ah.

Allan Sepkowski: And they're like little, tiny pebbles and every time you tried to hit 'em with a hammer or something you'd maybe get a couple, but the rest would scatter. And, oh, it was horrible. But I won second place, and I had a chance to either get a fifty pound —

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember what you made?

Allan Sepkowski: It was some kind of a pale ale.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

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Allan Sepkowski: I named it something obscene and it was an acronym for COTU. I can't remember what it was. If I remember I'll let you know.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's funny.

Allan Sepkowski: Anyways, took second place and I had a chance to either take home a fifty-pound bag of grain or a barrel from their collection that they just did their first barrel project in.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow.

Allan Sepkowski: And it was a Bowman barrel, which Bowman is here in Virginia, Bowman Brothers, and they do bourbon and some other things. And I took the barrel. I won that barrel and then we did a barrel project with it at the club, and that was really cool.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. How'd that turn out?

Allan Sepkowski: That came out good.

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We made—I think it was a bourbon barrel porter, Baltic porter.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Allan Sepkowski: And we used that same barrel that they did. We primed it and made sure that it didn't leak, and it was sanitized with—I think we used a handle of bourbon or something in that thing. [Laughter] And then six or seven or ten of us brewed beer differently in our own systems and then came together and filled that barrel up and then let it age there for, I think, a couple of months.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, wow.

Allan Sepkowski: And that was the first barrel project I was in, and that came out good. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you saw that table that was out there with the barrel head and the spades.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm, yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: That was the barrel.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh.

Allan Sepkowski: And my friend made that.

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Sarah Rodriguez: In the brew shed?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Allan Sepkowski: My friend made that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, cool.

Allan Sepkowski: He shellacked the top that had the barrel head where it still says Bowman. But yeah, and ever since then I've done a couple of barrel projects with folks. A lot of the guys, they like to do the sours, Flanders Red, Lambic, Oud Bruin. Those aren't my styles. I don't like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's fair.

Allan Sepkowski: I prefer a porter or Belgian beers. I really like Belgian beers.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk more about some of the unexpected either challenges or unexpected successes that you've kind of had while home brewing, things you didn't realize starting that would be either really good or really bad?

Allan Sepkowski: Well, some of the early challenges was not knowing what I was doing and just either reading instructions from a page and then trying to carry those out and not taking care of, say, the water or sanitation or things of that nature, even though I read the biggest thing you

should do or have done is make sure that you abide by all the sanitation rules that you can.

Clean, clean, clean, clean, clean.

Sarah Rodriguez: ‘Cause what can happen if you don’t?

Allan Sepkowski: Well, you can catch a bug. Your beer can catch a bug, which it could catch a bad bug, bacteria, which could ruin your batch. These guys that do these sours and stuff, they introduce bugs but they’re good bugs, to make it what they want it to be, but you never want one by accident.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Allan Sepkowski: So sanitation.

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I didn’t adhere to some of the sanitation early on and I had one batch that I know came from the pumps. I didn’t clean the pumps properly and I ended up throwing it away and that was the first time ever that I had to throw a batch away. But then I learned my lesson. The really cool thing about that is taking a recipe, making it your own, and then making that beer and then being able to emulate or copy it to get the same beer. That I thought was the coolest thing ‘cause you’re using basically the same grains. It could be from one manufacturer or another. You’re using the same water, the same hops, same yeast.

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You’re doing all the timing as you did. You’re using the same equipment. And a lot of people try to make something again for the second time and it doesn’t come out. But the first time I did that I was, like—I had some beer left over here from the first batch and it was spot on.



Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Allan Sepkowski: And to this day I think that particular recipe I've made probably a dozen times. Really, really good.

Sarah Rodriguez: 'Cause you've been able to fine-tune the recipe and the process.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. And it's so good. Oh, it's so good, too. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: What kind of beer is it?

Allan Sepkowski: It was a double IPA.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Allan Sepkowski: Double IPAs were coming around. Nobody really knew what they were. And after a while it morphed into a New England IPA.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Allan Sepkowski: So add more hops, add 'em later, add them in a late addition but earlier in the late addition.

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The old days was, like, well, wait till it's fermented then add your dry hops. Now it's, well, throw your hops in right away and that'll give it that hazy appearance, that kind of thing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: And some people call 'em juice bombs or New England IPAs or hazy. In fact, I'm probably gonna make that in a couple of weeks.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. That's awesome.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: We talked a little bit about how COVID affected your work. I guess we did. Could you share for the recorder again kind of how COVID affected brewing; maybe even access to ingredients, if any?

Allan Sepkowski: We really didn't give it much thought only because brewing was a hobby until we said, hey, let's brew, and then we looked at each other like how are we gonna get our stuff?

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Everything's closed.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Allan Sepkowski: And it just so happened that Original Gravity started a program—that's the brew shop in Lakeside—he started a program where you could send in the orders or call in the orders and he would measure them, crush them, and package them up for you and have curbside pickup. And once we learned that that was there it was, like, oh, this is great! And it didn't impede on our brewing whatsoever.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. Back in business.

Allan Sepkowski: In fact, we probably brewed a couple extra batches in that time. Even to this day I'll send in my order and have him crush it.

Sarah Rodriguez: And he still kinda helps with that?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Oh, sure. Sure.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. That's great.

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Did you notice more people getting into home brewing or how did the community change, if at all, with the pandemic?

Allan Sepkowski: Just prior to the pandemic as a home brew club we were finding ourselves with less and less members.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay.

Allan Sepkowski: I think because—ten years ago there weren't that many breweries in Virginia. You had the big breweries, then you had almost big breweries like Sierra Nevada and the like, New Belgium. So people were going to these other—and craft beers were just starting to come back again.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

0:38:01

Allan Sepkowski: If you remember, back in the [19]90s folks would have something in their back room where they would call it a microbrew. And a lot of folks—that's how, I think, Legends started way back when and they kept it up. They were the only ones that kept it up through this whole time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Allan Sepkowski: But you saw more and more craft beers coming on. Sam Adams was doing them, Sierra Nevada, New Belgium. We were seeing stuff from the West Coast come over, certainly from Colorado, St. Louis, that kind of stuff. And we were all getting a taste of that. And so I thought maybe that some of the home brewers who got into it to brew good beer were finding that they can get it commercially and didn't want to go through the hassle and the expense of brewing their own batch.

0:39:06

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

Allan Sepkowski: Some of the diehards continued with it because it's a craft. I don't brew it to save money at all but . . . So I thought just before COVID our membership looked like it was going down a little bit. And then, through COVID, we still held the meetings, but it was on Zoom.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: And I know one meeting I went to, I don't think we had twenty-five people on there, twenty people. And so I thought, well, is this gonna kill the club? And a few of the guys that had been there for a long, long time just kept it going and kept it going and kept it going and it kinda bounced back.

0:40:00

And if I remember correctly, the last three or four meetings we've been busting at the seam at the meeting.

Sarah Rodriguez: It looked busy last Wednesday.

Allan Sepkowski: And since I've been with the club we've been meeting in that room at the Mekong. And in the beginning we cleared out all the tables and put rows of chairs and they'd be full. And then craft beer hit. People were waning or either leaving the group or whatever. Then you can go in there and you can fit everybody around two tables. It was getting really thinned out. But now I think it's coming back.

Sarah Rodriguez: Interesting.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: And that kind of leads me to ask what your thoughts are on where home brewing is going kind of right now into the future, or home brewing in Richmond?

0:41:00

I know you're almost on your way out, but . . .

Allan Sepkowski: I think it's regaining—there's a lot of home brewers in Richmond that are not part of the club. If you go on social media there's a couple of platforms on there, sites if you will, where there's hundreds and hundreds of people on there. And I never knew we had so many enthusiasts in the city of Richmond, but we do. Not everybody goes to the James River meetings. It's open to everybody. Anybody can come in. But I think it's going to get a little stronger here as you see some of these bigger craft beer places selling out to Big Brother or Big Sister, if you will, you're gonna see, I think, more home brewers come on saying, hey, that's . . .

0:42:05

Some of these guys really take offense to it, like when Devils Backbone sold out to Anheuser-Busch people boycotted their beer. I'm, like, it's still good beer! What are you doing? You're only spiting yourself.

Sarah Rodriguez: But kind of coming back to the craft, I guess.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. I think people are going to want—now with the shiny and new, better and smaller equipment they can do the same thing that, say, my setup can do, which is three reconditioned kegs, which is a big system. I actually had to build that shed for it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

0:42:56

Allan Sepkowski: When you can create a recipe from a one-pot system that can either be plugged in or wired into your home's electricity and do it all in one pot in—I wouldn't say half the time but with less time, why wouldn't you? And it's not that expensive. In fact, I think I'm gonna upgrade this system to that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. Like, it's becoming more accessible?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's becoming more accessible. I think the grains are more accessible. You can either get 'em from your local home brew shop, which I encourage, or you can get 'em anywhere online right now.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you have any specific or special memories or anything that stands out in your mind from being with the James River Homebrewers?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. I would participate in the cluster brews or the remote brew days, which I really enjoyed.

0:44:02

And believe it or not, that system down there, I would lug that thing in the back of my pickup truck with everything else.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really? Oh, gosh.

Allan Sepkowski: And the entire pickup truck would be just loaded.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: But we would go, and I'd bring a grill, I'd bring a pop-up, some sausages, and brew equipment and materials and we would just have such a blast doing that.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome.

Allan Sepkowski: I can't do it now 'cause I don't have a pickup truck anymore, but I do intend to visit the next one. I missed this last one. We are supposed to have it—I think there's a significant weekend in March or maybe it's May, sorry, that brings home brew people together.

0:45:00

It might've been the celebration of signing home brewing into law, meaning decriminalizing it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: I think Jimmy Carter did that many, many years ago. And I can't remember if it was May or November.

Sarah Rodriguez: It was, like, an anniversary of that?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. Yeah. And it's called Big Brew Day, and the entire home brew community across the country, across this country and beyond, participate in it. If you're on social media you'll see hashtag whatever, brew day, big brew, whatever. And there's people just enjoying themselves. I think I like that probably the most.

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Allan Sepkowski: The other part, too, is I like the idea of making something, then having my buddies over, and then catch a buzz off of something that I or we brewed. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Right. That's super special.

Allan Sepkowski: It's the coolest thing is, like, we did that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah. [Laughter] That's awesome. And you have a great space for it.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Thanks.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you talk me through—I saw some of it when I was here for your brew day, but could you talk me through what a typical day of home brewing looks like?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. For that you want to go back to sourcing the grains, sourcing the ingredients. And there's a kind of a ritual that we do and it's to go to the local burger joint, get their biggest burger that you can get, pick that up, have a beer while it's cooking, and then bring it over to Tony's place, eat this thing—it's called the Big Mike—eat this burger until you can't eat anymore, drink a couple of beers, and then go get the grains.

0:47:04



Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Allan Sepkowski: That morning I like to get started early so about 7:00, 7:30 I'll have everything pulled out of the—I store some stuff here in the garage—and I'll pull everything out. My buddies who brew with me, they know what we've gotta do so if they get here before I get down there they pull everything out. Strike some water right away and make sure all the ingredients are accounted for. Make sure everything is cleaned and nothing grew on the equipment or in the equipment, like spiders.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

And once you strike the water you dough-in, start a mash, and then you sit around for an hour.

[Laughter]

0:48:02

We have a rule, we follow Ed's [sp] rule—my buddy, Ed—he has a rule, no beer before 10:30 in the morning. So what do you think we do?

Sarah Rodriguez: Wait till 10:30?

Allan Sepkowski: No. We drink Mike's Hard Lemonade.

Sarah Rodriguez: [Laughter]

Allan Sepkowski: Only on brew day.

Sarah Rodriguez: As long as it's not beer.

Allan Sepkowski: Only on brew day and maybe if it's vacation too.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure.

Allan Sepkowski: But try not to drink so much because I do have specific timing, specific temperatures that I have to adhere to and once it's mashing then the clock starts, make sure the temperature stays where it needs to be. Start a circulation pump to kind of circulate the wort so it gets clear, if you will. The grain bed acts as a filter of sorts.

Sarah Rodriguez: Just as you're putting it in the boiler?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. And then, as we're ready after we hit that—I like to go for the full hour or full ninety minutes depending on the grain I'm using. And once I'm satisfied with it being clear and it's recirculated enough, and it's converted we'll put it into the boil kettle. And once it's in the boil kettle we'll rinse the grains, we'll heat that up, and then we'll rinse the grains with the remaining water, we'll sparge, but I do a batch sparge. I don't do the trickling water and stuff. A lot of guys do that but that'll increase your brew day by forty-five minutes or an hour.

0:49:59

And then, once we've rinsed it, we put it in the boil kettle and take a reading. If it's the reading that I'm looking for—well, actually I generally let it go anyways and I'll work on it as the boil goes on. And depending on how humid it is outside or how hot it is or whatever it's going to depend greatly on what your boil time is. Minimum an hour for pale malts and then for pils we generally go an extra half hour to boil off undesirables. And then we'll take a reading when we're done. We'll add the hop additions as we go.

0:50:59

This particular one that we did this last weekend was a Saison, so it had a couple early hop additions but not much and then a lot of late hop additions. And so all that's on a timer and I use software for that. And then, once we hit flame out we flame it out, turn the flame out, enjoy a beer while it's cooling down. We'll start the pumps up and the plate chiller to cool down the wort. It's basically a heat transfer so if you put cold water in there and put hot liquids on the other side of it and they'll become cold, as cold as that water is, depending on how fast it's going through the pumps or whatever, we can adjust that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right.

0:51:59

Allan Sepkowski: And once you sanitize the carboys, put the cold wort in the carboys, take a final reading, and this past one I had to add—it was a little too high, so I added about a half a gallon in each carboy to bring the gravity down, the measurement of sugar. Once we did that—I use Clarity Ferm. Clarity Ferm does two things, it precipitates the gluten from the beer itself and it also precipitates the solids and other things that might be associated with chill haze and making unclear beer. We're not like the commercial brewers where they have a centrifuge and all that stuff that just spins it clear.

Sarah Rodriguez: Spins it out, yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: And then make sure the temperature's right, pitch the yeast, and put it in the fermenter.

0:53:01

And then wait. This one had a late sugar addition which I've never had to do before. I put that in the day after it was fermenting. And then, it'll have dry hops, which is three days before, so it's gonna ferment for two weeks so at eleven days I'll put in the dry hops. And I put them in loose. And then I'll cold crash it after two weeks. Cold crashing is just reducing the temperature in the chamber, and that also helps precipitate solids to the bottom.

Sarah Rodriguez: To clear it out.

Allan Sepkowski: 'Cause when you rack the beer off of the yeast cake, if you will, that's all beer and all usable stuff and that's what you carbonate once it's in kegs.

0:54:03

And we'll carbonate—I force carbonate at twenty pounds for two or three days and then I'll test it each day to see how well it's coming. And honestly, when you have a home brew, when you keg it on day one and then you carbonate it, by day three it's a different beer. By day five, by day seven even, it's conditioning even in those kegs, it becomes, I think, a better beer as it sits for a little while.

Sarah Rodriguez: During that carbonation stage?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah, during that carbonation stage even if I wasn't carbonating it, if you sit on that beer for a couple of weeks before you serve it you're gonna have two different beers. The day you kegged it will be a different beer than two weeks down the road.

0:54:59

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: Just invariably it happens and sometimes it lasts, sometimes it doesn't.

I've got a Tripel on in here and I need the sugars to fall off a little bit. They'll condition into the brew but for a Tripel it's a little more sweet than I really want it to be.

Sarah Rodriguez: So is there much you can do to it now?

Allan Sepkowski: Just sit and wait.

Sarah Rodriguez: Oh, okay.

Allan Sepkowski: Sit and wait, and it may not condition out. It might just be that—which is fine. It's a good beer.

Sarah Rodriguez: It's still good, yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: It's really good.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Allan Sepkowski: But my biggest challenge that I wanted to do as a brewer was—I don't know if you recognized this or not but some Belgian beers, most if not all, will have what they call lacing on the glass.

0:56:00

It'll leave part of the head on that, and you have a little bit, little bit, little bit. They call that lacing. So I challenged myself to do that, when I'm brewing Belgian beers is to make that happen. And I tried different grain bill additions. I've added different adjuncts like flaked oat, flaked wheat, not necessarily flaked corn but these things that would help bring, I guess, a

protein out in the beer that would keep that head from dissipating. So when I achieved that, I'm, like, this is the coolest thing! [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: You got it? Hello.

0:57:00

Allan Sepkowski: Hey.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm Sarah.

Allan Sepkowski: Sarah, that's my daughter, Sammie [sp].

Sarah Rodriguez: Hi, Sammie.

Sammie Sepkowski: Hi.

Allan Sepkowski: We're talking about home brew.

Sammie Sepkowski: Oh, that's right. Okay. I didn't know.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sammie Sepkowski: I don't know. I thought you guys were getting murdered in here or something.

Allan Sepkowski: Murdered? Come on. [Laughter] Did you park out in the cul-de-sac?

Sammie Sepkowski: Yep.

Allan Sepkowski: Okay.

Sarah Rodriguez: So you were able to achieve the lacing?

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: How was that?

Allan Sepkowski: That was the coolest thing, and I couldn't help but tell anybody that was drinking my beers, "Look what I did! Look what I did!" And it's one of those things that you don't really notice when you're drinking something. You're, like, oh, why is there lacing on this glass? You just take it for granted 'cause it's supposed to happen with that particular style or whatever.

0:58:00

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm.

Allan Sepkowski: And I was so proud of myself. And I think I added—I can't remember. The research I was doing—I can't quote what I put in there—but I was tweaking the grain bill to fit that outcome.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure. How cool.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. That's awesome. That must've felt great when you saw that.

Allan Sepkowski: Yeah. My neighbor—he moved—even to this day he'll ask me what I made or I'm making, "Did you get the lacing?" [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Checking in.

Allan Sepkowski: I'm, like, "Yeah."

Sarah Rodriguez: That's funny. Wow. Well, as we're kind of wrapping up is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to talk about? Any memories? Any stories?

0:59:00

Allan Sepkowski: No. I mean, this has been a great conversation to me. Like I told you, I'm not an expert or a historian or whatever, I'm just an enthusiast that likes to do this craft, as they call it. I consider it a craft 'cause I put time into it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Allan Sepkowski: Money. [Laughter]

Sarah Rodriguez: Um-hm. There's a lot of science to it also.

Allan Sepkowski: There's a lot of science. That's the part of my brain, though, that I don't necessarily absorb easily so I have to—I tell my friends this—I have to take the lawnmower apart before I can start it.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Allan Sepkowski: So there's a lot of that trial and error and whatnot. Maybe that's science, I guess. But no, it's really been fun. I'm glad you stopped by.

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

1:00:02

[End]