

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT** » John
Branding and brewer Austen
Conn; the farm's Bank Barn
taproom; estate malt, grown
on the farm; the farm's
barley field.

CASE STUDY

WHEATLAND SPRING FARM + BREWERY

Harvesting their own grains and yeasts for country ales and lagers, Bonnie and John Branding are out to prove they can build a sustainable farm business by growing beers that taste like their place. **BY JOE STANGE**

AN OLD WOODEN HORSE FENCE separates the east and west fields on Bonnie and John Branding's 30-acre Virginia farm. Growing into and around the boards of that fence is a knotty cherry tree.

A few years ago—not long after they bought the farm—John was clearing weeds from that fence line. He examined the tree: small and shrubby, it didn't look like it would amount to much. "It was early in the spring, so it hadn't flowered yet," he says. "I didn't realize it was a cherry tree, and I went out there with the chainsaw. And I was like, 'Hey, Bonnie, I was just going to take this out, any objection?'

"She's like, 'No, don't touch it! It's going to be beautiful!' So I cleared everything else around it, and it just stood there like this giant shrub. I went ahead and trimmed it, but it came up.

"And sure enough, it was gorgeous. It was like a message from the farm: Keep working hard, you're going to have these

obstacles—you're going to have these fence boards you're going to have to grow through—but you can find a path and stick with it. So, it gave us hope."

They dubbed it the Hope Tree. As Bonnie explains, a lot of the trees and other landmarks around the farms have names. They christened many of them in those laborious, anxious days before they fired up the Wheatland Spring Farm Brewery in June 2019.

The 189-year-old farm is in Waterford, Virginia, about 50 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. Much like that tree, the brewery has blossomed, attracting the attention of beer travelers and enthusiasts from the D.C. area and beyond. They appreciate the dedication to local agriculture and terroir as much as they enjoy the pastoral setting and the country lagers, farmhouse ales, and IPAs.

Among the farm-brewery's admirers is Greg Engert, beer director for the Neighborhood Restaurant Group (and a regular

contributor to the *Brewing Industry Guide*). For in-the-know drinkers, his choice to serve Wheatland Spring beers at bars such as ChurchKey, Rustico, and Shelter is a meaningful endorsement. "I find their uncompromising commitment to ingredient-driven beers impressive," Engert says. "The dedication to informed sourcing and utilization, as well as to brewing classic styles, makes Wheatland Spring stand out in the current craft milieu. Add in a gorgeous farm setting along with beers that are consistently considered, tweaked, and improving, and you have a very special place in Northern Virginia."

LAND BEER

The Brandings bought the farm and planted the first seeds in 2018; this summer will be their third estate harvest. The plans and ideas, however, were more than 10 years in the making, inspired by five years they spent living in Germany. "We had biked to enough beer gardens and had enough German beer and thought for enough years about maybe being crazy enough to attempt a farm brewery,"



Bonnie says. “And a decade or so later, here we are.”

On weekends when they had free time, they would get out of Munich and explore the countryside. “And you have these small farms, or you have these small breweries run by families,” John says. “It’s the sixth, seventh generation running it now. But they have this deep connection to the land, to agriculture, to the community around them. And they’re entrenched in the best way possible. We fell in love with that.”

That experience in Germany also inspired the brewing of what the Brandings call “land beer.” To them, all Wheatland Spring beer is land beer. The Germans use the word *landbier*—it simply means “country beer,” and breweries use it to evoke images of local, traditional lagers. To the Brandings, it reflects the farm and its surroundings. They also organize an annual Land Beer Fest to mark the anniversary of the brewery’s opening (though in 2020, its inaugural year, pandemic precautions limited it to a reservations-only, table-service event).

Land beer “has to do with culture and a mindset,” John says. “It’s this connection to agriculture and to artisans, and to this more tightly knit community of craft maltsters, small hop growers, and small family breweries.” In Germany, he says, those small village breweries aren’t trying to compete with the bigger ones. “They’re happy and content with their market, just as it is. For us, that’s essentially what land beer means. It’s this marriage of farming and brewing that in the U.S. has either been a thin connection for a long time, or not there.”

Now that the Brandings have a few years of actual farming under their belts, “land beer” has a deeper significance that they can feel in their bones. “Talk to any farmer,” John says. “It’s not glamorous work. You’re muddy, you’re dirty, it’s smelly, it’s really hard, and you get cut up, and you are pushed to your limits. You can do everything right, and Mother Nature decides otherwise, and you lose a crop that year.” It’s not romantic, but it’s an important part of how beer gets to the table. “It’s not magic. It happens through a lot of really hard work from a lot of people, typically

who are behind the scenes, who most folks don’t see.”

Another part of it, Bonnie says, is simply pulling people’s attention to the land. “We also use the phrase ‘estate land beer,’ so people in the wine community will very much identify with what that means,” she says.

“One of the things that is kind of unique in our space is growing with such intention on our own farm, where the beer is also being brewed. ... We’re huge proponents of sourcing locally and getting what we can from our neighbors. But to also put in the literal blood, sweat, and tears of going through the crop rotations and being farmers alongside brewers—we try to spark interest in our customers through some of these phrases, and sometimes they want to dig deeper and know what that means.”

The Brandings don’t describe themselves as brewers, but rather as farmers who built a brewery to make a small farm sustainable. “We’re a farm,” John says. “We make an agricultural value-added product here—like a cheesemaker would, like other farms around here. We’re in a community of about 400 acres of sustainable farming, and that’s the community we most identify with.”

GROWING INGREDIENTS, AND A BUSINESS

Most of their fields are devoted to grain, but there are about two acres planted with vegetables and herbs. They used their own cucumbers, for example, in Hold on to Summer—a cucumber gose whose malt and wheat came entirely from the region. There are lots of herbs, too, Bonnie says. “Also estate honey; we have beehives as well.”

Each year, she says, they get closer to producing more beers that are fully estate-grown. They can do so now, with a rustic gruit—they have their own malt, well water, herbs, and a few yeast strains captured from the farm. Someday, they say, they’ll have their own hops, too.

Wheatland Spring brews with 100 percent craft malt. It was the first brewery in the state to get the Craft Malt Certified seal from the Craft Maltsters Guild. Some of that grain grows in their own fields before going off to the maltster—Murphy & Rude in Charlottesville, about a two hours’ drive south—before returning to

the farm with the added value of having sugars and enzymes ready to make some beer. Wheatland Spring also buys craft malt from Epiphany in Durham, North Carolina, and other producers with whom they’ve established relationships—including Mecca Grade in Oregon.

“For us, it’s about transparency with ... our guests here, with people who buy our product,” John says. “And from the start, on every can or bottle of beer that we sell—and on the menu here on the farm—we tell people exactly what’s in the beer. We give a percentage of estate grain, we give a percentage of Virginia grain, and we give a percentage of regional grain.”

Those amounts vary with each beer. The new East Crib Farmhouse Lager, for example, gets 23 percent estate-grown malt, while the Bauernhof Alt gets 19 percent. The Hope Grows IPA gets none from the farm but relies on regional craft malt. “We feel like this drives transparency with folks, so they know what they’re getting into,” John says. “It encourages conversation. People then want to ask about it. They ask, ‘What is estate grain?’ I’ve never heard of that before.’ So it gives us an opportunity to talk about not just our farm, but small farms, and why we think small farms are important.”

Besides the grains and the veggies, they’ve sourced some natural yeasts from the farm, too. Collecting and finding a few that were suitable took trial and error. “We had them isolated in a lab,” John says. “I think we got back 20-some strains. Then we started tasting through—we did runs with some wort, just some trials. The vast majority were nail polish. It was rough—one of the worst tastings I’ve ever been part of. But we found a few that we really started to enjoy. And then we whittled it down to three that we’re very happy with. We feel like we got really lucky with those three.” All three resemble Belgian ale strains, with two of them more like saison yeasts—but each with a unique expression. One comes from the Hope Tree and ferments into a profile similar to abbey ales.

Going into spring 2021, Wheatland Spring’s fields were planted with two-row barley, soft red winter wheat, and a soft white winter wheat bred for the climate. This region is wetter and more prone to fungus and certain diseases than more traditional grain-growing areas. While not perfectly in sync, the proliferation of smaller breweries has gone hand-in-hand with the breeding of locally suitable grain varieties—and especially with the rise of smaller, regional maltsters who can link the two with distinctive malt products.

To the Brandings, that’s an exciting thought because it should lead to beers and styles that are truly rooted locally.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT ▶ Bonnie and John Branding; the brewery's coolship; wheat growing in the field; the brewery focuses on quality and expression in beers like Found Artifacts unfiltered pilsner.

Those are beers worth traveling for—those not easy to imitate elsewhere.

“A lot of what we’re observing here is the decentralization of a lot of the grain growing,” John says. “And the craft maltsters are one of the first waves of this. If you look on a map and see where the craft maltsters are, you can see where the increased interest is in decentralizing the grain economy. As you look around, it’s pretty exciting because just like they have in Germany, France, or Belgium, what we’re most excited about is having regional beer in the United States.”

Compared to Europe, the American beer scene seems homogenized to the Brandings—and that’s partly a function of commodified ingredients. “Amazing things [are] happening in craft brewing right now,” John says. “But what we would love to see is originality come to the United States—where the mid-Atlantic is known for certain types of beer—because that’s the kind of grain that grows there, and these are the kinds of hops that are grown in the mid-Atlantic, just like California has amazing crops, the Pac-Northwest has amazing crops. We’ll have, I don’t know, eight different regions in the United States, and they’re all known uniquely for different types and styles of beer—because that’s what grows there, and that’s what’s natural to their environment.”

That’s not to say that ingredients shouldn’t come from elsewhere—Wheatland Spring’s Bricolage imperial stout gets single-origin cacao nibs from the Dominican Republic, for example—but it’s the expansion of local options that’s exciting for brewers who want to plug into their terroir and produce something distinctive.

Hops remain a weak point in this and other regions, but researchers are working on that. “Our hope is that we [will] have some pretty killer hops in the next five to 10 years that taste like the mid-Atlantic,” John says. “It’s not going to be Motueka

[or] Mosaic—but that’s good. We want it to be unique to what we’re doing here, so that someone comes in from California, and they say, ‘Wow, I’ve never had this beer before; this tastes amazing. It doesn’t taste like anything I’ve ever had.’”

THE BREWERY & ITS BREWER

The 10-barrel brewhouse lives in a century-old barn they call the Corn Crib. There is a coolship in the loft; they use it occasionally for inoculating wort for spontaneous fermentation. (“We’ll tell you in a couple of years if it worked,” John says.) More often, they use it for open fermentation, much like Bavarian brewers do with traditional weissbier. For example, they used it recently to ferment Bear Witness, a citrus-laced witbier that gets one of the estate yeasts. “We found that especially the estate yeasts—because they’re so aggressive, and they just attenuate, and they just go—the geometry works really well with those beers,” John says. “So just about every farmhouse ale that we make is open fermented.”

Their head brewer is Austen Conn, whom the Brandings hired to move East and become a farmer-brewer. His previous stints were at Trumer (Berkeley, California), Laurelwood (Portland, Oregon), and Buoy Beer (Astoria, Oregon).

“We didn’t want to cut any corners,” John says of hiring Conn (whose Instagram bio says “wort farmer”). “We put a national search out looking for the right person. ... This is not a nine-to-five production-brewery gig. This is literally get your hands dirty digging holes, some days putting plants in the ground, doing all sorts of stuff that moves the mission forward.” The Brandings knew Conn had the chops—but then, so did other candidates. “The trick wasn’t trying to find a great brewer,” John says. “The trick was trying to find a great brewer *and* someone who had the same passion that we did for marrying farming and brewing.”

Conn’s job is straightforward but far from easy: Take that emphasis on

estate-grown and local ingredients and make the best possible beer with it. “All the stuff we do on the back end is also very intentional,” John says. “It’s all with this purpose to try to get things as highest quality as we can.”

When sourcing ingredients, quality comes first, even if the preference is for local quality. If possible, they get it from their own farm or their neighbors. “And then we expand these concentric circles until we find what we need, based on the quality that we’re looking for,” John says. “It’s not about making local beer for the novelty of saying it’s local. ... But because beer is fundamentally an agricultural product, it’s our belief that the more control we have over the supply chain of the grain, the water, the hops, the yeast, and everything else, the more we’re going to have the chance to make the best beer we possibly can.”

“And of course, the fewer miles all that travels, the better for the Earth as well,” Bonnie says. Meanwhile, if the quality is high, they don’t mind embracing a certain amount of inconsistency. “Batch after batch, we don’t want to be consistent,” she says. “They’re all going to have their unique character because of what harvest we used.”

The idea is to let those ingredients express themselves in the beer, so that the terroir can have its say. “And the less we manipulate them, the more we amplify; the less we distort the ingredients, the more they’re going to express where they’re from,” John says. “The wine world has done an amazing job communicating this for years. ... They’ve been able to work people through these steps of terroir, and why it’s not a bad thing, but it’s an amazing thing that you can taste the harvest years and different vintages of wine. So our approach, our thinking is, why is beer any different? Why is beer so focused on consistency, when quality should always be Number One?”

Trying to consistently hit certain numbers or precise flavor profiles, he says, takes away from the agricultural character of those ingredients. “We’d just rather let the ingredients shine,” he says. “As long as it tastes good, and as long as it’s high quality, we’re happy.”

BEERS FROM A PLACE WORTH SEEKING

The Brandings have built a destination brewery, but it’s also won local support.

“We didn’t know how what we’re doing would be received by the community,” Bonnie says. “We were fortunate to see that the first people taking interest, wanting to be a part of it, showing up on a daily basis, was the farming community—the people who are so in touch with the land, the people who wanted to sit and talk with

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us about what row that cucumber came out of in their beer right now.”

As more people in the D.C. area and the surrounding region have learned about the brewery, its profile and reputation have grown. Generally, the farm is open five days a week to reservations or walk-ups. There is plenty of space, picnic tables, and a fire pit. The Brandings also operate a one-bedroom cottage B&B on the farm for those who want to overnight. “And so they have their own privacy, but they can also be part of the farm for the weekend,” Bonnie says. “And it’s a nice touch point with customers—even the folks who are coming out locally from D.C. to spend the weekend. It’s nice, giving them a tour of the farm, and letting them go out and pick their own radishes to take back to their family for the week.”

The beer prices are not small-town brewery prices, but neither will they shock those used to hyped IPA four-packs—or those who understand all that goes into the beers at Wheatland Spring. Most go for \$16 to \$20 per four-pack of 16-ounce cans. A 750 ml bottle of mixed-fermentation estate-yeast beer, such as the First Harvest with Blackberries, typically goes for \$25 to \$30. The goal, the Brandings say, is to be as transparent as possible.

We “look at our pricing more along the lines of what an estate vineyard would charge for a bottle or for glasses,” John says, “because of the costs that go into farming the land, harvesting it, grain maintenance,

then malting, then having it back on the farm, and all these other extra costs.”

John has kept his “nine-to-five” working for the auto industry in D.C.; Bonnie manages the brewery’s front-of-house. With the farm, the Brandings aren’t trying to get rich or grow a huge business—they’re just making their small farm pay its own way. “If this was about money for us,” John says, “we were doing this all wrong from the start.”

“That’s John’s favorite line,” Bonnie says. “We could be making hazy somewhere.”

“You talk about the marginal difference between craft malt and commodity malt,” John says. “You’d fall out of your chair if I told you what it was for estate malt. It’s a totally different ballgame.”

Their goal is for the customer to see to all those choices—estate ingredients, sustainable farming, the restoration of two historic barns, and more—and say, “The fact that you’re putting this 200-year-old farm back to work, the fact that you’re doing all this stuff—this is actually a really good value. Yeah, I can’t believe you’re not charging more for this.”

HOPE GROWS

That special cherry tree that John almost chopped down has given its name to a beer as well as a charitable endeavor. The endeavor advances Wheatland Spring’s stated mission to “grow beautiful beer that celebrates and strengthens small agriculture.”

“One of the huge motivating factors here actually has nothing to do with beer, per se,”

John says. “It has to do with small farms in the United States. Growing up in Illinois, I spent every summer on my grandparents’ farm. We went back there 15 years ago, and it’s a strip mall now. It broke my heart. It’s a story that a lot of people share.” Hope Grows is aligned with that mission to strengthen small farms. Proceeds from the Hope Grows IPA—one of the brewery’s better sellers since it launched in May 2020—go to different projects that support the farming community.

The pandemic has been hard on farmers in different ways; many had to throw out crops last spring amid hospitality shutdowns, throwing their livelihoods in jeopardy. “It made us think about farmers even more and about what are they going through right now,” Bonnie says. “And if we can make some small difference, I think now’s the time.”

The first beneficiary of Hope Grows was Future Harvest, a regional nonprofit that supports sustainable agriculture—for example, with scholarships for young farmers. The group also bought surplus produce after the lockdowns and sent it to food pantries.

This year, the proceeds will support mental health by helping to establish a national crisis hotline for farmers who need it. No such hotline exists yet, but Wheatland Spring will help establish it in cooperation with AgriSafe, a national nonprofit dedicated to “protecting the people who feed the world.” The proceeds also will support a program that helps to teach young farmers how to better cope with stress.

More broadly, John says, all Wheatland Spring beers support small farms and businesses in direct ways. “We know all the maltsters. We know most of the farms. We know these people we’re buying stuff from,” John says. “When someone buys a beer here, I know where the money is going, and it’s going primarily to small businesses. So, built into our ethos, the way in which we operate is to support small businesses—and specifically small farms, and small agricultural value-added companies.”

Something else that will stay small, they say, is their distribution footprint.

“Our model has always been more of a destination, come-to-the-farm experience,” Bonnie says. “I think at some point in the future, as we continue to grow, there may be a stronger presence in distribution. ... It will never overtake what we’re doing here, though. I think a real part of ‘land beer’ is people sitting literally in our barley field. As the crops start to grow up, we mow paths out into the field, and they can have a standalone, isolated table in the middle of the field, surrounded by barley or wheat.”

She adds: “The beer just tastes better here on the farm.”

