

Beer, people, purpose: Three words. One local brewery. Another year

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March 25, 2019



Virginia Beer Co. is celebrating its three-year anniversary March 26, 2019. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

Since Chris Smith and Robby Willey first opened Virginia Beer Co. three years ago, some of their business plans have changed: Certain lines have been crossed out, other things have been handwritten into various documents.

But one thing, the company's motto, has remained unchanged: "Beer, people, purpose."

The brewery's owners, William & Mary graduates Smith and Willey, said they've stuck to their roots since the brewery first opened on March 26, 2016.

"The fun thing about year three — it means sitting back and let's celebrate our roots," Willey said. "Being at the heart of the community is the soul of the business plan."

While Virginia Beer Co. has gained popularity in the Williamsburg area — and on taps in Hampton Roads and Richmond — over the brewery's three years of operation, Willey said the business' plans always boils down to community involvement.

The brewery hosts local bands, food trucks, fundraisers for local causes and more.

Smith and Willey are also on several local boards and commissions, including the Williamsburg Economic Development Authority and the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance Board of Directors.



Virginia Beer Co. co-owner Chris Smith straightens items up at the bar on March 22, 2019. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

“Things are definitely busier,” Willey said. “People come here for the people.”

‘Staying relevant’

Virginia Beer Co. has needed to find its own niche in a market where numerous craft breweries, distilleries, wineries and beer giant Anheuser-Busch have also made their homes.

Just weeks ahead of the brewery's grand opening, the duo told WYDaily they did not have plans to launch with a signature beer; instead, they would wait to see what customers demanded.

“As breweries open, we’re trying to stay relevant,” Willey said. “As it expands, it distracts your audience.”

Distribution has grown substantially for Virginia Beer Co., but the customer-first approach — and the company’s motto “Beer, people, purpose” — has lasted through the brewery’s first three years.



Virginia Beer Co. co-owner Robby Willey straightens items up behind a window on March 22, 2019. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

In one window of the auto body shop-turned-brewery, Willey and Smith have displayed a row of about two dozen cans representing every beer the company has released in its three years.

“You’re reinventing yourself every time,” Willey said of brewing small-batch releases. “The only way to find out [if a recipe is successful] is to challenge our release schedule.”

Thanks to customer feedback, some of those brews have returned to the tap multiple times, or been designated as rotating seasonal releases.

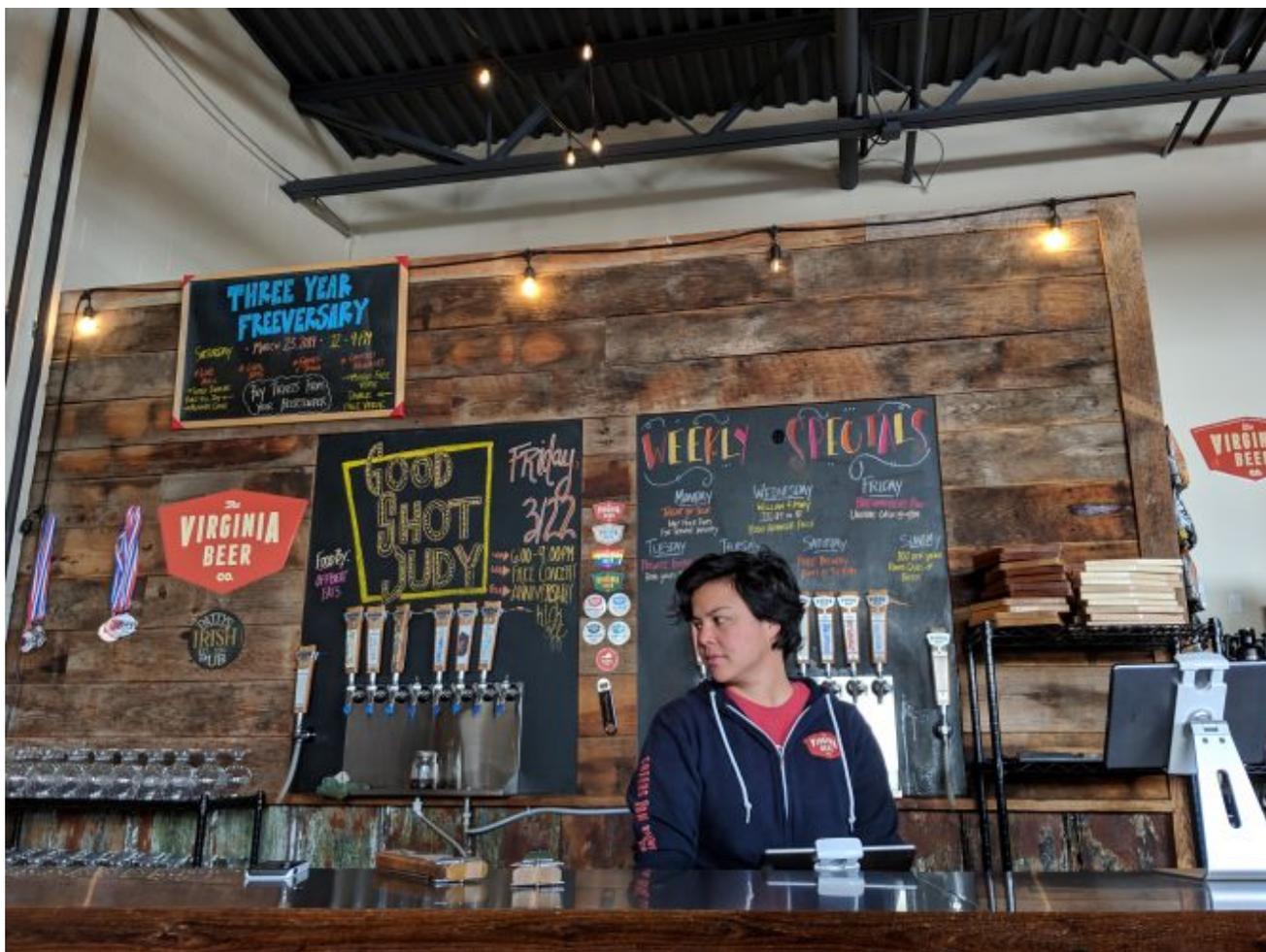
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While craft brewing is all about finding new recipes that resonate with patrons, it's also about collaboration. Willey said Virginia Beer Co. collaborates with other breweries.

Other breweries, such as AleWerks, also welcomed Virginia Beer Co. when it was just beginning to form, Willey said.

And that welcoming attitude will be reciprocated in the future.

"If someone else comes in... we'd do the same thing," Willey said.



Taproom Manager Luci Legaspi stands behind the bar at Virginia Beer Co. on March 22, 2019. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

Retaining staff and making moves

Another thing Willey and Smith are proud of? Staff retention.

Virginia Beer Co. started with Willey, Smith and a handful of staff, family members and volunteers.

Three years ago, the brewery had eight staff. Now, it's up to 14, and has a sales department.

Smith said the biggest change he's noticed in the three years is how much he and Willey delegate responsibilities as co-owners.

"I've learned to rely on our team," Smith said. "At the beginning, we didn't know everyone as well."

That trust in the team has helped create consistency in brewing and business operations, Smith added.

And for Luci Legaspi, taproom manager and business developer, that consistency has helped build a stronger community connection.

"Robby and I talk a lot about things we have going on," Legaspi said. "So many times, we say 'Wow, we're getting pretty good at it.'"

Willey said he and Smith expect Virginia Beer Co. to continue changing.

"What's day one of year four look like?" Willey said.

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