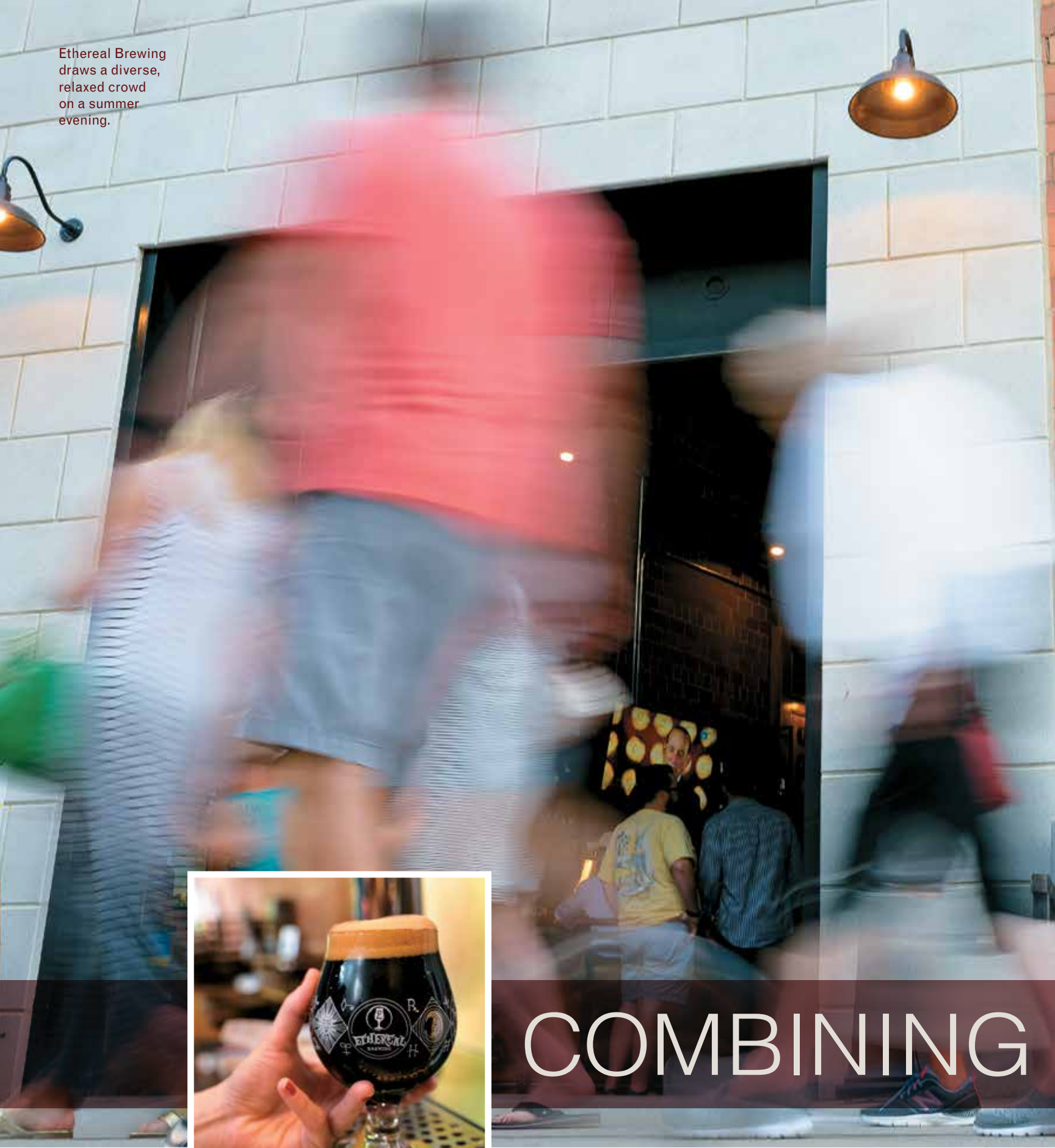


Ethereal Brewing
draws a diverse,
relaxed crowd
on a summer
evening.



COMBINING



There's more than just beer on the Brewgrass Trail

By Jacalyn Carfagno / Photos by Reggie Beehner

It's an early weekend evening, and Ethereal Brewing is just beginning to get into gear. In the soaring back room, overlooked by huge tanks filled with the most local beers, people are playing darts, a traditional beerhouse game.

Outside, on a patio overlooking Town Branch Creek, young parents, beers in hand, relax with a toddler as bird-song wafts from the trees overhanging the water.

Like a dozen or so other craft brewers in Lexington and the Bluegrass, Ethereal claimed an abandoned place to work the magic of creating a business out of craft beers and community.

CRAFT & COMMUNITY



MirrorTwin Brewing Company is a popular addition to the buzzy National Avenue corridor.



Ethereal Brewing is a cornerstone of the Distillery District, once a rundown area of warehouses and abandoned buildings.

Their names are as varied and imaginative as those of their products: Rock House, MirrorTwin, Country Boy, West Sixth, Blue Stallion, Pivot, among the breweries. And for the brews: Arf, Arf, Arf; Red Blooded American; Sail to the Moon; Shotgun Wedding; Three Floyds Yum Yum.

The emergence of so many breweries and the popularity of their products inspired the “Brewgrass Trail.” Craft beer enthusiasts — and there are many — can visit a dozen enterprises on the trail to sample the brews. Participating breweries distribute passports that are stamped at each stop. Get stamps at all 12 and a special Brewgrass Trail T-shirt is the reward.

VisitLex, the tourist bureau that operates the trail, prints trail passports each year in April to coincide with national and local observations of craft beer week. It printed 10,000 this April and by the end of June, 3,000 were gone.

“I know we’re going to have to print more,” said Erin Hilton, who manages the trail for VisitLex. “It’s nuts. Lexington people

combining craft & community



Country Boy's Daniel Harrison says craft brews win over customers. The brewery, which began as "a tiny little glorified homebrew system," produced 10,000 barrels last year.

love their beer; I can tell you that much."

Social beer drinking has moved far beyond the neighborhood taverns in working-class neighborhoods where a clutch of older, mostly male occupants found smoky companionship quaffing a modest selection of brand-name beers, what the craft community now calls "big beer."

The new beer tourism — Google it — respects that sense of tradition but also welcomes families with young children; anyone with a dog; people who come not just to drink a beer but to practice yoga, join a running or cycling group, compete at trivia, or play bingo.

Gone are the food selections that ranged from peanuts to pickled eggs to pretzels. Instead, expect a food truck serving Japanese noodles or empanadas, a local pizza place with a wood-fired oven on site, a fish restaurant operated by one of the most respected chefs in the region.

"We want to be the spot where you come to get your news, to hang out, to banter with your friends," said Daniel Harrison, a co-founder of Country Boy, the first craft brewery to open in Lexington.

"We look to build communities; that is what we do," explained Derek Selznick, executive director of the Kentucky Guild of Brewers. "Buying 'big beer' is not an experience;



We look to build communities; that is what we do."

—DEREK SELZNICK,
KENTUCKY GUILD OF BREWERS



The first craft brewery to open in Lexington, Country Boy has expanded to Georgetown.

combining craft & community



Craft breweries such as Ethereal, left, and West Sixth create casual gathering spots and a sense of community.



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going to a taproom is.”

Often those taprooms are in spaces as unique as the beers themselves. Many of these new-wave brewers have chosen locations on the edges of once-thriving neighborhoods or industrial corridors. Country Boy opened in February 2012 in a former batting cage in a neglected area off South Broadway. West Sixth came on shortly after in an industrial building that had housed a commercial bread bakery.

Ethereal began brewing in 2014 in the Distillery District just west of downtown on Town Branch Creek, the spring-fed stream that provided water for early bourbon producers there. Lexington's Distillery District had fallen on hard times, leaving an array of interesting but abandoned industrial buildings.

Andrew Bishop and Brandon Sloan shopped around for months looking for a place to start Ethereal but resisted real estate agents who wanted to take them to the Distillery District. From their high school and college days in Lexington, “we knew Manchester was where you went to retrieve a towed car or, farther out, to get to the jail,” Bishop said. But once there, they “fell in love” with the masonry, the mass, the soaring ceilings.

Love matters, but there are other good reasons upstart craft



Seasonal brews are popular with customers.

combining craft & community



Like trivia nights, yoga classes are featured at many breweries, such as this one at Rock House. Right, West Sixth Brewing offers a range of community events each month, including a farmer's market



brewers are attracted to these buildings, Selznick said. “The spaces tend to be cheap; they tend to have high ceilings. Structurally they tend to be able to handle the weight.”

And they’re interesting and adaptable, kind of like the breweries themselves. The West Sixth complex now includes an indoor aquaculture enterprise, Smithtown Seafood, a coffee roaster, a

complex of artists’ studios, a distillery, and a community bicycle shop. Ethereal’s neighbors include a distillery (of course), restaurants, a local ice cream maker, several artists’ studios, and more.

Local on many levels

Local is a key word. Like chefs in the local foods movement, craft brewers are dedicated to local ingredients. Country

Boy uses hops grown in Scott County. Each year it and other local breweries play around with blends using strawberries, blackberries, apples, pawpaws, and other fruits from nearby farmers.

“We’ve done some crazy stuff like with locally roasted coffee ... peaches, coriander ... that’s kind of the fun stuff for us,” said Harrison, who’s now Country Boy’s brand manager.



Country Boy partners with local food vendors, including Doodles, on a rotating basis. Mirror Twin partners with a pizza maker in the same building.

In July the state agriculture commissioner joined the brewers' guild and Kentucky State University to announce the second year of a project that matches several brewers with local producers to create unique, limited-edition craft beers for release in October during Kentucky Proud Beer Week. Last year, for example, the beers included a Peach Sour Saison that was the combined effort of Ethereal and Against the Grain in Louisville.

Just as reviving abandoned buildings adds value to neighborhoods and tax rolls, creating beers with local ingredients supports nearby farmers, keeping those dollars circulating in Kentucky's agriculture economy.

And it's about creating community.

Selznick said the program includes visits by the brewers to the farms to see where and how their crazy and not-so-crazy ingredients are grown. Later, the growers join them at the brewery to learn how they "are playing with particular flavors" to produce a unique, Kentucky Proud beer.

Collaboration is also important among the brewers on the Brewgrass Trail. When Bishop and Sloan, after a few years of brewing beer "just for the fun of it," began to think seriously about it as a profession, the guys at Country Boy helped them develop a business plan. It's not uncommon to see a bartender in one craft brewery wearing a T-shirt from another.

A few of them get together each month to compare notes, figure out ways they

can work together, and, of course, have a beer together, Bishop said. They lend equipment and sometimes even ingredients to each other.

But, Bishop said, the growing craft scene also keeps them on their toes. With new beers hitting the local market all the time, "it helps us from becoming complacent."

So far, it's worked.

Production on the upswing

Country Boy opened, Harrison said, with "a tiny little glorified homebrew system" that rolled out 500 barrels of beer (31 gallons to a barrel) that first year. That jumped to 10,000 in 2016 with the addition of a new production brewery and a



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West Sixth IPA is poured into cans at the brewery.

second taproom in Georgetown. Ethereal will produce 800 barrels this year and expects to boost that by 50 percent to 1,200 next year.

The Guild of Brewers' Selznick said five Kentucky breweries in 2009 have exploded to 53 now with the expectation that another 12 to 15 will come online this year. Combined, they produced 102,000 barrels of local beer last year and contributed about half a billion dollars to the Kentucky economy.

Bishop thinks there's plenty of room to grow in Lexington, but no one should think brewing beer is an easy path to a quick buck. "It's a labor of love. We work 10-hour days, seven days a week. You're fighting for every dollar."

Still, that labor of love is part of what keeps people coming back, accounting for the exponential

growth of the Brewgrass Trail and beer tourism throughout Kentucky.

Craft brewers believe that each time someone experiences a new, local, and very different beer, their industry has gained a customer.

"It's like switching from McDonalds to a real hamburger; that's just going to open up your mind," said Country Boy's Harrison. And "once they have a great beer they think 'this is awesome ... what else is out there?'"

He figures craft breweries have only about a 5 percent share of the market in the state, meaning plenty of beer drinkers haven't yet had the awesome experience that will turn them away from big beer to local beer.

As Selznick put it, "the real enemy to us is not each other; the real enemy is bad beer." **KM**



STOPS
ON THE
TRAIL

"Respect the bourbon. Drink the beer," is the motto of the Brewgrass Trail, which winds through Central Kentucky, encompassing 12 unique craft breweries.

Passports are available at all the participating breweries and at the VisitLex visitors center at 401 W. Main Street in downtown Lexington. Each year beer tourists who visit each brewery and get their passports stamped can turn them in to VisitLex for a complimentary Brewgrass Trail T-Shirt. For more information about the trail, go to visitlex.com or call 800-845-3959.

LEXINGTON:

- Alltech Lexington Brewing and Distilling Company
- Blue Stallion Brewing
- Country Boy Brewing (also in Georgetown)
- Ethereal Brewing
- Life Brewpub
- Mirror Twin Brewing
- Pivot Brewing
- Rock House Brewing
- West Sixth Brewing Company (two locations)

PARIS:

Rooster Brewing

HARRODSBURG:

Lemons Mill Brewery

DANVILLE:

Beer Engine

For details, visit www.visitlex.com/flavors/brewgrass-trail/

