



YALOBUSHA BREWING CO.

It took a trip across the Atlantic for Andy O'Bryan to realize his dream of locally brewed beer in the heart of north Mississippi.

In early 2013, while O'Bryan was on his honeymoon in Ireland, he was enamored by the Emerald Isles' beer culture. He returned home to Mississippi, frustrated by the lack of breweries in his region.

"I always thought it was crazy that we didn't have a local brewery here," he said. "Finally, I had to look in the mirror and say, 'Maybe you should do something instead of just complaining about it.'"

Back on American soil, O'Bryan, an entrepreneur with more than a dozen startups under his belt, went to his friend Mac Nichols with his vision. The two men kicked around the idea, and by that May they purchased a 15,000-square-foot historic building – the former home of Hendricks Foundry and Machine Shop on Water Valley's Main Street.

"We didn't take very long to jump in feet first," O'Bryan said.

With the support of their wives, Macon and Joli, the two tapped into the craft beer industry with the October 2013 opening of Yalobusha Brewing Co. Today, they distribute their beer throughout Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee and, soon, Alabama.

The brewery's first year was a litmus test. After offering quaint tours and free samples of the product, O'Bryan realized the high demand for the niche craft brewery experience. They expanded their tasting room to a 100-person-capacity space with 10-12 beers on tap. The room's brick walls and wood beams are now the backdrop for live music every Friday night and beer tastings and tours on Saturdays.

O'Bryan said the tasting room experience is instrumental in allowing patrons to connect with a brand they might pass by in the beer cooler.

"When you go out to a restaurant or to a retail store, you're bombarded by choices," he said. "But if you come here, you see where it's made and who is making it. You make an instant connection."

Yalobusha's brewers produce an average of 300 barrels a month. Four flagship beers – Mississippi Blues Trail Ale, Snopes Family Pilsner, Larry Brown Ale and Coffee Break Happy Hour – are supplemented with additional seasonal offerings. One of O'Bryan's proudest accomplishments is that patrons can raise a glass to charity with the purchase of those flagship beers. A percentage of sales from each is donated to local nonprofits like Leap Frog and Move On Up Mississippi.

"We like giving back to the community that helped us get our start," he said.

This spring will provide a new set of challenges as the Yalobusha team works with distributors and other Mississippi breweries to lobby the state legislature for direct sales. Mississippi is the only state that doesn't have any form of direct sales at breweries, and if the measure is approved, patrons could buy a limited amount of Yalobusha brews to go, in the form of cases or a growler fill station.

"It's time to catch up with the rest of the country," O'Bryan said. "We're small enough that it really would move the needle for us."

To help move that needle, Yalobusha Brewing is setting out on a new culinary venture. O'Bryan is in the planning stages of building a restaurant inside the brewery, and if all goes according to plan, they will be dishing out Southern food alongside their craft beer early this year.

For more information, visit yalobrew.com.