

# The Virginian-Pilot

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## flavor



Harriott's Legacy, an alcohol and beer company, displays its three newest products — a ginger beer, a hard lemonade, and a Mango mimosa beer — at First Landing Beach in Virginia Beach. MIKE CAUDILL/STAFF PHOTOS

## FAMILY RECIPE

### Harriott's brewed beverages offer refreshing taste with a side of history

By Korie Dean  
Staff Writer

Tasting one of the drinks from Georgia Dunn's beverage line is like taking a sip of history.

That was Dunn's goal.

Nine years ago, she started Harriott's, a popular line of Caribbean-inspired alcoholic drinks that is now sold in shops along the East Coast, including local Harris Teeter stores. The packaging features maps of the Chesapeake region and Dunn regularly comes to the area to promote the line — including this summer for the latest addition, Harriott's Mango Mimosa.

But Dunn never set out to become a brewer. Rather, she wanted to preserve in a tangible way her family's life on Salt Cay, an island in the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Growing up, Dunn visited the island and listened to her grandmother and aunt recount the generations-long tale. In 1585, Dunn's 13th-great-grandfather, Thomas Harriott, was an English navigator who voyaged to Roanoke Island, present-day Dare



Georgia Dunn's 13th-great-grandfather, Thomas Harriott, described making "ale" from Algonquians' corn in his 1588 chronicle "A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia."

County, North Carolina, with Sir Walter Raleigh. He chronicled his discoveries in "A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia," which was published in 1588.

Decades later, Harriott's son — whom Dunn calls "Thomas Harriott the Younger" — settled in Bermuda. Around the mid-1600s, the family moved to Salt Cay and began harvesting salt from the water. The successful venture eventually supplied

premium salt to meat-curing companies, including Smithfield, and lasted until the mid-20th century. The family business died out, and many of the Harriotts, including Dunn's father, left the island.

When Dunn's father died in 2005, Dunn, now an adult, returned to Salt Cay to prepare her father's funeral. As she dug through chests of documents — birth certificates, death certificates, handwritten notes from her

grandmother — the stories Dunn heard growing up came back to her.

For years after her father's death, she returned to the island, feeling a pull to chronicle her family's history. She compiled a manuscript spanning about 2,000 pages and planned to donate it to the Turks and Caicos National Museum.

But she knew it wasn't enough.

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**“It was almost like he showed up, and he was sitting next to me, saying ‘It’s about time.’”**

—Georgia Dunn, on her ancestor Thomas Harriott’s legacy

## Brewer

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She remembers days as a child in Salt Cay and everyone holding a glass of homemade fermented ginger beer, a refreshing treat to counter the island heat. As an adult, she saw few people drinking it. It was easier by then to buy drinks at the grocery store.

Much like her family’s history, Dunn thought, the folk craft of making ginger beer was at the whim of time, on the verge of disappearing from the island’s collective memory.

Almost instantly, Dunn realized she could perfect making her family’s ginger beer recipe and distribute it on the islands under her family’s name.

It wasn’t a practical decision. She had never brewed any alcoholic beverage and hardly knew where to start.

But something pushed her forward. “The energy felt like a train pushing me from behind,” Dunn said. “There was so much energy behind it.”

She got to work in 2012, brewing small test batches using handheld equipment. Like the island elders, she used high-quality, fresh ingredients. In 2013, Dunn, who lives in Charlotte moved the operation to Greenville, South Carolina, where she ramped up production intending only to distribute on the islands. By 2015, demand for the flagship brew, Harriott’s Islander Ginger Beer, was on the rise in the U.S., and it hit grocery store shelves that Memorial Day weekend.

And, as it turns out, brewing runs through Dunn’s blood in more ways than one.

In 2017, Dunn began researching more about her family to prepare for a Colonial Williamsburg presentation. She turned to Harriott’s “Briefe and True Report.” She

worked with Fred Smith, an anthropology professor at William & Mary, and pored over the text.

One section sent a chill through Dunn — Harriott described making “ale” from the Algonquians’ “pagatowr” or corn. Based on Smith’s research and the pair’s findings, Dunn believes that Harriott was the first Englishman to document brewing beer in North America.

Dunn thought back to the unexplained energy that pushed her to brew her ginger beer five years before. It had to be Thomas Harriott, she thought.

“It was almost like he showed up,” she said, “and he was sitting next to me, saying ‘It’s about time.’”

The success of her ginger beer has been more than she ever imagined. It is now available in nine states, as well as in the Turks and Caicos, Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands. Customers have dubbed the spicy, citrusy drink, a “Moscow Mule in a bottle,” and like that it is gluten-free.

The line includes a hard lemonade and the Mango Mimosa.

The lemonade is inspired by the simplicity of island life and was requested by Dunn’s customers. The mimosa captures another piece of Dunn’s family history. When she was a child on Salt Cay, she ate fresh mangoes straight from the ship that brought them from Haiti.

The map of the Chesapeake Bay region on Harriott’s packaging is an artistic recreation of a 1585 map by Thomas Harriott. The packaging also reads “Brewing Since 1585.”

Dunn doesn’t know what she’ll create next or when, but brewing is what she feels called to do.

“It’s in my DNA to make beer.”

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