

# What's the Best Way to Honor a Family Legacy? Beer.

Georgia Dunn Belk's inventive libations pair an incredible history with modern taste.

BY KELLY GRAY

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The Age of Exploration gave the modern world many gifts, among them Thomas Harriott. Known as the British Galileo, Harriott traveled to the New World by order of Queen Elizabeth I in 1584. Sending him from Europe to the Caribbean and the British Colonies carved out a place in time of such significance that any arbitrary turning would have forever altered contemporary society.

As Sir Walter Raleigh's close friend and confidante, he aided in plans to establish the English colony on Roanoke Island. He drew the first telescopic map of the moon, predating Galileo's observations. Harriott's contributions to the sciences have resulted in colleges and observatories named in his honor.

But Harriott himself would likely be more personally moved by how his descendent, Georgia Dunn Belk, chose to honor her 13th-generation great grandfather: she named her beer after him.

"I discovered during the research stages of a book I'm writing about my family island culture, that my progenitor Thomas Harriott was the first to ferment beer in North America," says Belk. "I didn't plan on being in the beverage business or founding the British West Indies Trading Company, the umbrella company, but little did I know I would have this ancestral force propelling me forward, making it happen."

Belk's family were among the founders of what would become the Turks and Caicos Islands, where they preserved what's known as the White House on Salt Cay, one of the few Bermudian style architectural marvels that remain. It is the on-location site of classic film Bahama Passage starring Sterling Hayden, Madeleine Carroll, and Dorothy Dandridge in 1941. Belk's family was the Harriott Salt Co. and consumed refreshing fermented ginger beer—a proper beer with alcohol—after their long days raking salt for export to the US for food preservation, prior to the industrial revolution.

Belk was eager to preserve a piece of that culture and began making



*"Drinking ginger beer in the islands is like having French wine in Paris."*

her own fermented ginger beer. She brewed her first batch in 2013 on Grand Turk after buying brewing equipment to share with local island bars, restaurants, and grocery stores.

"I made 10 cases at a time, fermenting hand-prepped produce, and packaging it with a hand-held bottler hooked up to a generator," said Belk, who delivered it across an island 10 miles long and a mile wide in her early brewing days. "My husband Bill loved it and asked me to make it for his family and friends in the Southeast."

Belk stored the equipment in her girlfriend's garage on Grand Turk and returned to the US searching for a partner brewery who would make it taste exactly like those 10 cases at a time. Shortly after, Belk received a recommendation from Bacardi for a brewery a two-hour drive from her home in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Experts say it takes five people two years to go from brewing the first batch of beer to market due to permitting and distribution requirements—not to mention sales and marketing. But within two years, Belk was selling her beer in Harris Teeter and exporting it back to the Turks and Caicos Islands.

"I wanted to preserve as much of our island culture as possible and

The Harriott port on Salt Cay in Turks and Caicos was the site of the industrial complex for Harriott Salt Co., where the flag at full mast signaled to ship captains from near and far that the salt was ready for export.

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In the Diplomatic Reception Rooms at the State Department, Georgia Dunn Belk stands next to the desk where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.

COURTESY GEORGIA DUNN BELK

that included the beverages consumed by my ancestors,” said Belk. “Drinking ginger beer in the islands is like having French wine in Paris and that cultural history inspires me.”

Today, Belk has four beverages in retail stores—Harriott’s Islander Ginger Beer, Harriott’s Lemon Mimosa, Harriott’s Mango Mimosa, and now Harriott’s Orange Turmeric Beer, which she debuted this past month in the Mid-Atlantic and Carolinas, including Thomas Harriott’s old stomping ground, Tidewater, Virginia.

Spending months at a time on the road, Belk barrels down the highways in her silver Nissan Xterra, which she calls her chariot. She drives from town to town, trekking to grocery stores and gourmet markets. Once she arrives at each store, Belk sets up a table, pouring one-ounce samples of the amber liquid for the customers she adores.

Belk could have chosen an easier vocation. Having preserved their ancestral home in the Turks and Caicos, she could just kick back, drinking libations every day rather than making them. She was press secretary to US Congressman Fred Grandy from Iowa (yes, that Fred Gandy, star of *The Love Boat*) and a United Nations graduate scholar between her two years of graduate school. Once upon a time, she worked as assistant chief of staff to the mayor of San Francisco. Her husband is the larger than life, charismatic William “Bill” Belk, eldest grandson of William Henry Belk, founder of Belk department stores. His own iconic Carolina lineage is a door opener by any stretch. It begs the question, why with such familial firepower, would Belk choose to become a lady brewer?

“In the beginning, it was a struggle, and eight years later, it still is, but looking back, I can see how the pieces fell into place and aligned for me in a challenging industry,” said Belk. “Success

At the British High Commissioner’s Residence in Bridgetown, Barbados, Georgia Dunn Belk stands with noted historian and archeologist Dr. Fred Smith, researching her ancestor, Margaret Grimsditch.  
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Georgia Dunn Belk celebrates the arrival of her Harriott beverages in North Carolina’s Outer Banks.

COURTESY GEORGIA DUNN BELK

came because it was not about me, but about offering my customers a meaningful experience, from the beer aisle at their local store.”

Belk is very hands-on, choosing all the ingredients for the beverages herself. She makes the drive to taste each batch of

beer before it ships to stores. Belk’s Xterra is a long way from the ship Thomas Harriott’s sailed at the behest of the British Monarchy, but it comes in handy when Belk delivers 1000 pounds of fresh ginger to be hand-prepped, replicating the traditional knife and cutting board for her beer.

“I love sharing the Harriott family legacy with my customers, so the long hours to make that happen is worth it,” Belk says. “The beer bonds us long after we have parted ways.”

Belk remains fascinated by the origins of ginger when the Spice Trade connected Asia to western continents, followed by advancements in maritime travel which extended trade routes across the Atlantic. This has helped her stand up to pressure from the industry, refusing shortcuts, a la ‘natural flavoring’ and instead, making real ginger beer like that which nourished her ancestors.

Those choices have paid off. Historical destinations including Colonial Williamsburg, Monticello and Mt. Vernon carried Belk’s beer. The chef for the Office of Protocol for the US State Department served it in the diplomatic reception rooms as the best of its kind in the country. Belk, a lifelong history buff, even joined the ranks of Martha Jefferson, who had brewed beer at Monticello to make brackish water safe to drink.

“I was teary eyed when I walked into the State Department and saw Harriott’s Islander Ginger Beer served next to the desk where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence,” said Belk.

If only Thomas Harriott could see the culmination of an expedition 500 years in the making, because of one woman’s determination to keep his memory alive beyond herself.

“We are all standing on the shoulders of giants and the driving motivation to do this is my admiration, respect, and gratitude for those who came before us,” said Belk. “Because Thomas Harriott made such a mark on all our lives, it feels like a fitting tribute.”