



BY ANDREW MOSIER

# THE BREW CREW

*The first local brewery since Prohibition has transformed the Lowcountry beer drinking landscape*

PHOTOGRAPHS

BY CHRISTOPHER

BROWN

**E**d Falkenstein and Louis Bruce are pioneers of sorts—in 1994 they opened the first brewery in South Carolina in more than 60 years. In the process, the two have not only opened the door for other brewers in the state, but they almost single-handedly refined the palate of beer drinkers across the Lowcountry.

## Full Sails Ahead

When Falkenstein and Bruce first became acquainted in the late '70s, beer was nothing but a mass-produced, watery, golden beverage they drank after a day on the water. “We were both really into windsurfing, back when the sport was just taking



*Removing mash—crushed malt steeped in hot water—from the mash tun. Right: Ed Falkenstein (left) and Louis Bruce in the Palmetto taproom*





*Old bottles undergo a rigorous sterilization process before being refilled.*

off,” says Falkenstein. Together they began searching for more challenging waters than the Lowcountry offered, discovering the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon, a deep narrow split carved by centuries of wind and water forming sheer rock cliffs. Along with some of the best windsurfing on the planet, the area was also known for its microbreweries, including the Full Sail Brewery—one of the first microbreweries in the country—located on the banks of the Columbia River. “We would drink some fantastic beer and tell lies about our day on the water,” says Falkenstein. “There was nothing like it—the beer or the windsurfing—at home.”

As captivating as the view of the gorge was, Falkenstein, an engineer, was just as fascinated with the maze of pipes and tanks that made the brewing process possible. After he and Bruce—who had worked as a wine importer before opening a construction company—had a few, they began talking about the possibility of starting something like it in Charleston. “Between the two of us, we knew it was something we could do,” Bruce says.

It took a few years for the idea to fully ferment. Bruce worked on a business plan, and Falkenstein began studying the logistics of the brewing process. And then there was finding a name for their company. “That was the easy part,” says Bruce. “We wanted something that reflected our market—South Carolina—and immediately

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Clay Merring, Study for Saturday Morning Circus, 2005. Watercolor, 22 1/2" x 14 1/2". Signed lower right: CLAY MERRING. Inscribed lower left: Study for Saturday Morning Circus.

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*“No one had tried to open a brewery since Prohibition. . . . A lot of the papers we filled out were restaurant liquor licenses that had been scratched out and written over by hand.”*

*—Ed Falkenstein*



*Freshly sterilized bottles are filled with beer, capped, and washed with multidirectional jets of water. The bottles then proceed to a station where they will be labeled before being sent to the distributor.*



*One of Palmetto Brewing Company's vats, where the fermentation process occurs*

came up with Palmetto, which speaks for itself and has considerable historical significance.” Starting in the mid-1800s, Palmetto beer was brewed on Market Street, which continued making a distinct Lowcountry beer until Prohibition was enacted in 1920, forcing it out of business.

Armed with an historic name synonymous with Charleston beer, the two began to seek financing for their venture. “The bank classified us as high-risk, right along with ostrich and clam farms,” says Falkenstein. “Amazingly enough, though, we got the money to get things started.”

### **The Ghost of the Blind Tiger**

Following the end of Prohibition, temperance laws in South Carolina remained considerably stout. Falkenstein and Bruce were originally told flat out by the state that what they wanted to do was illegal. “Then they changed their minds,” Falkenstein says. “The state just didn’t know how to do it. No one had tried to open a brewery since Prohibition.” The laws stated that anyone who produced an alcoholic beverage could not distribute it; anyone who distributed alcohol could not sell it; and anyone who sold it

could not produce it or distribute it. "That made things kind of hard," Falkenstein says. "The laws have changed a little, but we still can't sell our own beer."

Once the state decided that opening a brewery was not illegal, the parties involved still faced another challenge: "All of the paperwork they wanted us to fill out didn't even exist," Falkenstein says. "A lot of the forms were restaurant liquor licenses that had been scratched out and written over by hand."

While the state tried to untangle the bureaucratic knot, Falkenstein and Bruce went to work learning the brewing process. They toured countless breweries in the Pacific Northwest, and Falkenstein spent time learning the technical side of the craft at the Wild Goose brewery in his native Maryland. By the time they had a handle on exactly what it would take to make a go of it, the state had things figured out on their end. All that was left was finding a suitable location. "We knew we wanted to be in Charleston because the city has the highest quality water, which is very important in making beer," says Falkenstein. "We also needed a building big enough to house everything and with space to expand if and when we wanted." They found just what they were looking for on Huger Street, where they have continued carefully crafting their beers. The brewery is visible from the elevated portion of I-26 just before it meets Highway 17 and has become a landmark of sorts.

### If You Brew It, They Will Drink

In the mid-1990s, other than the domestic standards, beer selections in South Carolina were limited to mass-produced imports. "Beer is not like wine," Bruce says. "The fresher it is, the better. People didn't like many imports then because they didn't taste all that good since they weren't fresh." So when Palmetto entered the market with their first beer—an amber ale—they were sure they would have to win over a skeptical market. It turns out beer drinkers in the area were thirsting for good beer. Falken-

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*—Louis Bruce*



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stein and Bruce (the company’s only two employees at the time) produced 1,500 barrels (more than 45,000 gallons) of ale that first year. “It sold faster than we could make it,” Bruce says. Growth has been steady but tempered since then.

Currently, Palmetto brews four distinct kinds of beer: amber ale, pale ale, porter, and lager. The brewing process is done in batches with the fermentation process taking between two-and-a-half weeks for the lager (a light beer) to more than a month for the porter (a dark, heavy beer). Since opening, 100 fermentation barrels have been added to the original 75, along with an additional two employees.

Now it’s impossible to go anywhere in Charleston and not see the familiar lone palmetto tree logo on a beer bottle or tap handle. Approximately 85 percent of the beer Palmetto brews is distributed along coastal South Carolina; the rest is scattered throughout the state. “Of course we would like to expand our market someday,” Bruce says. “It’s not something we’re really pushing right now. We have to make sure we can meet the demand of our current market before we look to expand.”



*Bottles receive new labels, the final step before beer goes to distribution.*



An old advertising illustration behind the taproom bar shows the original pre-Prohibition Palmetto Brewing Company on Market Street.

### A Stiffer Drink

With the high demand for the four brews Palmetto already produces, Falkenstein and Bruce hope to add different types of beer to their roster in the future. “We really want to do some seasonal beers,” Falkenstein says. Although they’ve done this in the past, the brewery has been limited because of the demand for their regular brews and, once again, by state liquor laws, which, until recently, stated that beer could only have a maximum six percent alcohol content by volume.

“That made it hard to do many varieties of specialty beers, because they typically have a higher alcohol content than what we were already producing,” Falkenstein says. But in April 2006, state law changed, allowing for what are called “high-gravity” beers, with up to 13.5 percent alcohol content per volume. “We’re looking into doing some beers we couldn’t do before,” Bruce says. “Hopefully sooner than later. Right now our biggest challenge is keeping up with the demand for the beer we already make. It’s not a bad problem to have.” Cheers to that. ©

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Plate 136, Common or Virginia Deer, *The Virginia Quadrupeds of North America*  
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