



# BUSINESS IS ROOMING

Sip and sample your way around Southwest Virginia's growing number of tasting rooms.

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STORY BY CHRISTINA NIFONG





To step into Altus Chocolate is to enter a realm that didn't exist in Roanoke a few months ago. It's a place where sacks of cacao beans prop against an exposed brick wall and a giant graphic explains how local artisans transform a plant from Peru into decadent desserts.

But the folks at Altus are not content to simply sell their product, known as "bean-to-bar chocolate." They want customers to understand what they've created, to experience chocolate on a deeper level, to taste the range of unexpected flavors in their delicacies.

That's why, in addition to their dairy case of house-made cheesecakes, their beverage bar of chocolate drinks and their shelves of hand-crafted truffles, they offer wine and chocolate pairing nights, flights of chocolate and chocolate tasting events.

"There's a lot of education that goes into our tastings," explains store Manager Stefan Mueller. "People think: Chocolate is chocolate. But what we do is really unique."

The fact that Altus designed a space to tell the story behind its product, however, is not one-of-a-kind.

In the last year, at least nine new tasting rooms have opened in or around Roanoke, with plans for more on the way. In addition to chocolate, storefronts dedicated to sampling coffee, honey and mead, whiskey and,

**LEFT.** Norah Harper, 6, peeks into the chocolate cabinet at Altus Chocolate on Campbell Avenue.

**BOTTOM LEFT.** Almond Cranberry Chocolate Macaroons are among the selections in Altus Chocolate's glassed-in display case.

**BELOW.** Kyle Westlake, a barrista at Altus Chocolate, serves customers.

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**TOP.** Hilary Seiler (from left), 42, of Salem toasts Jacinda Williams, 46, of Roanoke County and Nicole Cooper, 44, of Roanoke after a morning of kayaking on Carvins Cove. It was followed by lunch at Ballast Point tasting room and restaurant.

**ABOVE.** Ballast Point Tasting Room & Kitchen displays its 128 taps near the entrance to the craft brewery's facility in Daleville.

of course, craft beer have recently bubbled up. In August, Twin Creeks Distillery opened a tasting room on site at its new production facility in Henry. In the works is a Boones Mill tasting room where Franklin County Distilleries will showcase its moonshine.

Credit the rise of the experience economy, a continued appreciation of all things artisanal and the further expansion of Southwest Virginia's micro-brewing beer scene with the boom in tasting rooms.

"I think tasting rooms are part of the overall experience that more and more people are looking for," says David Aldridge, E-marketing manager for Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge, the region's tourism promotion organization. "People want to learn the process behind how things are made."

But the fact that so many tasting rooms are opening up in the Roanoke Valley all at once says something about the evolution of this area, as well.

"Tasting rooms seem to be getting more popular everywhere," says Joanne Villers, co-owner of Blacksnake Meadery, who in July opened The Hive, a honey and mead tasting room in the Wasena neighborhood. "But I also think Roanoke is reaching a tipping point to, hopefully, become a destination."

## THE TOTAL EXPERIENCE

What are tasting rooms, exactly?

Think small portions, a slew of samples, an educated staff, a fun atmosphere and a place where businesses can sell directly to consumers.



They began as a way for wineries to share what was coming off their vines and out of their casks, typically located at a vineyard.

But as the concept took off, it has been reimagined for all manner of industries — and even within the world of wine.

Today, many wineries have tasting rooms offsite, in downtowns and other population centers, as a way for vintners to bring their products to larger populations.

Craft breweries, too, have found tasting rooms to be essential. A recent Brewers Association study showed that brewers with tasting rooms grew faster than those without. The trade group research also found that more than 9 percent of sales for small and independent brewers occurred at the brewery in 2016, a 2 percent increase over the previous year.

In the Roanoke area, it's craft breweries that account for both the largest number and the highest profile of recent tasting room openings. Hammer & Forge Brewing Company in Boones Mill and Beale's Brewery

in Bedford opened in 2017, and Charlottesville's Starr Hill Brewery launched its first satellite tap room in Roanoke in September.

But the biggest tasting room events of the year were the opening of Ballast Point Brewing Company's sleek glass-and-stainless-steel destination in Daleville in June and the late-August kickoff of Deschutes Brewery's prominent downtown location, anchoring Roanoke's historic market area.

While Ballast Point's facility is a full-service restaurant, the Deschutes space holds to a more traditional definition of tasting room, one where the beer takes center stage.

But both are all about sipping new samples.

"I think when you hear the term 'tasting room,' it implies this inherent element of experimentation," says Nate Brocious, tours and tasting room manager for Deschutes. "It's exciting."

At the Deschutes tasting room, visitors find an open space geared for engagement: 3-D videos connect customers with the places that inspire the Oregon-based beers, and the service staff is trained to inform, as well as provide for customers.

"When you walk in, you see the smiling face of a really engaged person behind the bar," Brocious says. "One of the things we really hang our hat on ... is service."

## A TASTE OF HONEY AND MORE

Not all recent tasting rooms openings have been a success, however. The Red Rooster Coffee Tasting Room & Lab opened in December 2016 and shuttered its doors six months later.

It was the brainchild of Red Rooster employee Philip Hatter and when he moved to Maryville, Tennessee, for a job as director of coffee and training at Vienna Coffee Company, Red Rooster closed the Roanoke tasting room with plans to open a new one at their Floyd production facility, once that underway expansion is complete.

Red Rooster will keep a presence in Roanoke, however. Blacksnake Meadery took over Red Rooster's space but is still carrying the Floyd company's coffee and will allow them to conduct regular cuppings, or coffee samplings, in the tasting room.

At The Hive on Main Street, the music is from the '70s, the vibe is laid back and the honey is flowing.

Joanne and Steve Villers have operated a meadery in Carroll County for 11 years. They have a seasonal "sipping porch" at that location, but for the last year, they've been searching for a space in Roanoke to sell their bottles of fermented honey.

On a recent night, a handful of couples wandered in, ordering

# Joanne Villers sets up the honey tasting like a quiz: By taste and smell, can a customer guess which of the six glasses holds avocado or cactus blossom or buckwheat honey?

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**Joanne and Steve Villers opened The Hive, a tasting room in the Wasena neighborhood, to bring mead from their Carroll County Blacksnake Meadery to Roanoke.**





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Honey from cactus (from left), raspberry, avocado, California wildflower, orange blossom and buckwheat are on display in The Hive tasting room. Owners Steve and Joanne Villers explain that though the ancient drink is made from honey, mead does not necessarily taste sweet.

flights of mead, wine and cider, or honey, and staying to chat and play card games at the colorful two-top tables sprinkled around the bright, living-room-sized space.

Joanne sets up the honey tasting like a quiz: By taste and smell, can a customer guess which of the six glasses holds avocado or cactus blossom or buckwheat honey?

So far, Joanne says, "We've had a great response. At times people have been lined up, waiting for us to open. It's kind of exceeded our expectations."

The meadery's popularity doesn't surprise Al-bridge from Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge. He says tast-

ing rooms are a natural outgrowth of a burgeoning "craft economy."

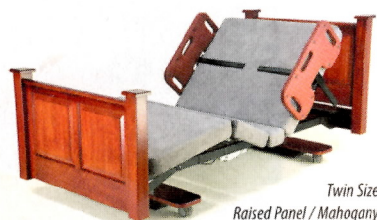
"People want to have a story behind what they're eating and drinking," he says. "They want to have a connection to it. I think [tasting rooms are] meant to be an experience as much as a place to get an after-dinner drink or dessert."

What might be worth noting, he says, is how quickly the trend has come to Roanoke.

"These are common all over the place," he says. "But it's really cool to see Roanoke right there with what other places are doing." ▲

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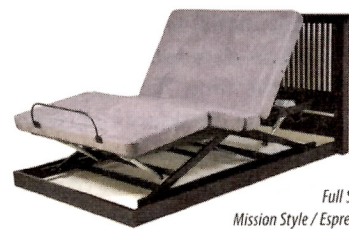
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