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# BREWING UP

A man with a beard and a green baseball cap is working in a brewery. He is holding a long metal rod that goes into a large, shiny stainless steel brewing tank. The tank has a large, rounded handle on the side. The background is dark, with some pipes and equipment visible. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the metallic surfaces of the tank.

HOW CAPE MAY BREWING COMPANY QUICKLY  
WENT FROM A DREAM TO A PHENOMENON

INTERVIEW BY VICTOR GRASSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK WEISS

# A STORM



**T**HEY started life three years ago at Cape May County Airport in humble fashion with a 12-gallon homebuilt setup. Today they run a 15-barrel system that turns out 500 gallons of beer, in 20 different flavors, that's inspiring a large (and fast-growing) fan-base), and winning awards along the way.

In short, Cape May Brewing Company is a phenomenon, one of this area's most successful, and best-loved, new businesses.

We asked another local phenomenon, artist Victor Grasso (who's a passionate beer drinker and also designs some bottle labels for CMBC), to sit down with two of the three founders of the company, Chris Henke and Ryan Krill (whose father Bob is the third member of the team) to find out if running a brewery is as much fun as it sounds. (Spoiler alert — it is.)

**Tell me something — if you were a beer what kind of beer would you be?**

RYAN KRILL: Some kind of weird IPA that doesn't say anything about what you're about to have. So you expect one thing and you get something else — a mislabeled IPA.

**Citrusy or hoppy?** Really hoppy, but then there would be something like hot dog



Artist Victor Grasso interviews Chris Henke and Ryan Krill at Cape May Brewing Company

flavor in there, something unexpected.

**Did you know what you wanted to do at college, and what did you study?**

CHRIS HENKE: Mechanical Engineering. And I don't know.

RYAN: I started as a business major and hated it. Then I switched over to philosophy and loved it. I wanted to work for myself. I

didn't care what it was, and I had no idea what it was. I didn't want to have a boss.

**You guys went to Villanova, right?**

RYAN: Yes, that's where we met.

**Were you big drinkers? Did you party?**

RYAN: Villanova's not like a huge party school but I definitely indulged.

**When you two were in college did you**




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Paul Nease, Ryan Krill and Chris Henke. "I work with my best friend, my dad, and everybody who works here is really cool," says Krill.

**start to have an affinity for craft beer?**

CHRIS: I did. My roommate and I got sick of Milwaukee's Best, so by sophomore year we started finding local beers, like Yards. Their pale ale was the first one and we started a bottle collection so we could keep track of what we drank. By junior year we had a pretty big collection.

RYAN: I was a little into craft beer, but it was mostly Miller Lite cans for me. It wasn't until after I graduated college that I got into craft beer. A friend of mine would go to Victory a lot and that was my introduction.

**How important are the bottle labels?**

RYAN: Very important.

**Sometimes you pick a cool label and think, "I got to try this?"**

RYAN: For sure. You go to Joe Canal's and there is a sea of bottles and cans. You need to stand out — whether that is really flashy or really subtle and simple.

**So why do you think the major breweries suck at it? Do you think there's a kind of outlaw, tenacious upstart attitude to craft brewing compared to the major guys?**

CHRIS: Definitely. The major guys aren't relying on a picture. It's just Bud Light. They rely on the name, and that's all they market. The lightest, most watery

beer you can drink. With craft brewers, it's not just a name. I mean, CMB is the local brewery here, but we're getting bigger and we're out of our county and that's not going to hold. It has to be more than just a name.

**So essentially, you're an artisan, and you're making something from nothing and with your own hands.**

RYAN: Right. And it's evolving. We're getting a foothold down here and creating a name for ourselves with the beer and we're beginning to tell a story and have our story evolve and the labels tell part of that story and speaks to what we're doing.

**When did you have the Eureka moment — when you just knew you were going to start making beer?**

CHRIS: I distinctly remember... it was Ryan's dad's backyard in Avalon and we were brewing all summer in 2010 and we were doing a batch of IPA on July 4 weekend — we always made IPA. We were drinking a Terrapin beer and Ryan said, "If these guys can do it, we can do it." Then he asked if I wanted to start a brewery and I said — of course. As a home brewer I always wanted to do it but I never had the skills. And that was the moment we were going to start a commercial brewery. Does that match up

with your memory Ryan?

RYAN: That is the exact moment. It's like what every guy in his mid-20s does down in Avalon in the summer — homebrew. Not fist pumping at the Princeton. So we said, "What's the worst that could happen?" The beer — I normally leave Terrapin unnamed — but the beer was terrible and it was like, "Why the \*\*\*\* do these guys get to have all the fun?"

**What was it like in the beginning when you opened? Were you confident it was going to be a success?**

RYAN: We had no idea what we were doing. We always joke that if we ever wrote about this experience it would be called "figure it out". There's no book on guiding someone's hand on how to open a brewery in Cape May. There's all these different laws that you need to learn about and you don't even know what applies to you or what doesn't — like zoning and all this stuff. A big educational experience.

**Was there ever a moment where you were like, "What are we doing? We have no money, we're screwed?"**

RYAN: There were little hiccups.

CHRIS: Little hiccups, but we were naive enough to never get to the point where



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we said, "This is over our head."

**Makes you reckless. Makes you go for it?**

CHRIS: Yeah, so everyone that comes in now and says, "We want to start a brewery"... we say to them, "Don't do it the way we did it." It was a year of not brewing, doing paperwork, and research. It was crazy.

RYAN: It's amazing how much brewing you *don't* do when you're starting a brewery. Part of it was that what we were trying to achieve was manageable. The dollars we were talking about, we could afford to fail. We weren't married, we didn't have children to *support* but we both had full-time jobs. I give Chris all the credit, he's way braver than I was. He quit his job first.

**And what were you doing Chris?**

CHRIS: I was a mechanical engineer and started doing that as a consultant, and knew that wasn't it.

**What about you Ryan?**

I was working for a commercial bank in New York City, so I was in finance. It was a nice-paying job.

CHRIS: I quit my job and lived off my savings.

**Would you guys say you put everything into this?**

CHRIS: Oh, yeah.

RYAN: Oh, for sure.

**So when did you know this was going to work, when you thought, "We're becoming a success, we got to expand?"**

RYAN: There's never been a moment where we were like, "Okay, today we're going to start a big expansion." It's always been like a steady expansion.

**So there's never been a moment where someone came in and said, "I want to buy eight billion bottles of beer from you?"**

CHRIS: It's funny — every month we have that moment where we have to get another tank.

**So there is no defining moment?**

CHRIS: One moment that stands out, before we started brewing and we finally had beer ready to be sold, we sent out Ryan's dad,



Paul Nease rakes out the spent grain, which is then sent to feed the pigs and chickens at Beach Plum Farm in West Cape May. Opposite: Chris Henke looks into the mash tun, after the grains have been raked out.

Bob Krill, the third partner, to Cabanas with some growlers and I said, "Hey, see if they want this." And his response to me was, "I'm going to *tell* them they want this." He went over there and they drank it and we just started selling them kegs and they took everything we could make. At that point it was like, "Hey, we're a commercial brewery."

RYAN: It was our defining moment, because I was still working in New York and driving down every weekend trying to do all the administrative stuff and make all this work. We weren't sure of the ebbs and flows of the summer and winter seasons. I didn't want to quit my job and try to support myself. But the first winter we were busy, so busy there would be lines out the door. So it was either, continue to work or jump in and make it happen.

**So now that you have a successful brewery in Cape May, do you guys find yourself with tons of propositions from women, now that you are rock star brewers?**

CHRIS: I have not.

RYAN: I don't know, maybe I'm just too oblivious to it.

**Maybe you work so much you don't really get a chance to get out?**

RYAN: Not really. I do a lot of events,

which is fun, but I'm not solicited.

**So Ryan, you're the figurehead of the company, the face. Do you think that's because you remind everybody of Quentin Tarantino?**

RYAN: I get that all the time.

**How did you become the social aspect of the brewery?**

RYAN: Um...

CHRIS: Personality.

RYAN: Yeah, personality. We have two distinct personalities.

**And you have two different color eyes. You probably pull witchcraft on people.**

RYAN: Yeah, I have some kind of chemical imbalance up there.

**So what do you think about craft beer culture? You see a lot of guys with beards, and it's a very male thing. There are many more male consumers than female. Do you think it's the salty old sailor, outlaw thing? Because wine was so popular for so long and craft breweries were still kind of underground and now it's so popular with a certain group. What do you think of the culture? Is it going to last?**

RYAN: I certainly think it's lasting. When a lot of people get started on these flavorful beers it's hard to go back. My dad is

a good example. He used to drink only Coors Light. And then slowly we got him hooked on these craft beers and now he loves it. Anywhere he goes he'll just buy an IPA and it has nothing to do with his involvement in this company — it's just that he's into it.

**Yeah, it's addictive. You can have a glass of wine and put the bottle away, but it's really hard not to drink an entire six-pack of good beer.**

RYAN: Right.

**So you totally avoided my question about the culture of beer drinkers. Do you think it's trendy to drink craft beer?**

RYAN: Our customer base isn't just guys with beards. The extreme craft beer consumers are that type, like Brian [Hink], our assistant brewer or whatever we call him these days. He's really into it and extreme. But we have all kind of people, like older folks and people coming right out of college being all about our beer. Our customer base is a huge spectrum.

**So let's talk about the price tag. You're artisanal, you're making everything yourself, so you have to charge more. You're not a gigantic company with the volume to sell cheap beer. How do you make it appealing? Or are people happy to pay more?**



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Among the flavors available at Cape May Brewery: from left, sweet stout, Devil's Reach, Cape May IPA.



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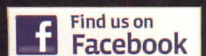
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RYAN: I think it's going to trend upwards but eventually it's going to flatten out. There are more breweries right now in the US than there has ever been. So it's important for each brewery to carve out its own niche. It's interesting to see all these breweries pop up, like you see a dozen nano-breweries opening in Philly and another 18 trying in NJ and although we started as a nano-brewery, just like these guys are doing, we quickly shed our skin from that because we wanted to avoid that label. It's going to be increasingly difficult to be successful.

CHRIS: I know what you're talking about, with the culture, the beards and stuff. We're trying to cater to both. Early on we made the beers universal. They weren't extreme beers that the burly men or hipsters wanted. We had our IPA, wheat, and stout. Middle-of-the-road beers that appealed to everybody. Your extreme beer, you can appreciate them but it's not going to be your favorite beer. So we set it up that if you're new to craft beer you're going to like it. We have an old guy who comes in and he never drank anything but light beer his whole life. We give him a little wheat beer as an introduction and that's how Ryan's dad Bob got into it. Our original IPA was built for

him, less bitterness, and now it's not bitter enough for him because his tastes have changed. We've kind of become the introductory brewery for the most part but now that we've established ourselves we can start with some more extreme beers, like our double stout. We can get away with it because we have a reputation. I don't think it's a trend. People are always going to be looking for the extreme thing and people are always going to be looking for something they can drink all night.

**Sure, and now it's getting popular to pair beers with food so you have to get even more creative. Which leads me to my next question. With so many breweries popping up, what is it that makes CMB stand out? Do you have some weird science experiment going on back there?**

RYAN: Right. So one, it's our name — Cape May Brewing Company, but beyond that is the beer. So we have this really great name and this really great beer that's getting a foothold in our region. And that's the goal and that's what makes it really special.

**And local ingredients...**

RYAN: Oh, yeah. For our beach plum beer, we use south Jersey honey, and we give away all of our grain to Beach Plum

Farm. They use the grain to feed their pigs and chickens and then serve those pigs and chickens for dinner at the Virginia Hotel and we're on tap at the Virginia so if you go there you'll get a beer that was made with the grain...

**Circle of life.**

RYAN: Sick and twisted circle of life.

**Very good. So how much do you look forward to going to work every day knowing you have no boss and that you're making beer for a living?**

RYAN: This. Is. Awesome. I had a little moment this morning, it happens every now and again, where I'm like, "This is \*\*\*\*\* great." I'm so appreciative. I get to work with my best friend, my dad, and everybody who works here is really cool.

**What's a typical day look like?**

RYAN: Everybody's day is a little different. I get to do a little bit of accounting in the morning and then tackle whatever project I need to do. I manage the taproom and all the staff as well as oversee some of the brewery stuff. Most of the brewery operations are on Chris, but I get to handle the administrative staff. I like to call myself not the president but the administrative dumpster.

**And Chris, you're the alchemist?**

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CHRIS: Yeah, I'm toying around with brewing or tanks. Trying to get it all finished up or where it needs to be. We are also always focusing on expanding.

RYAN: There's no typical day. Yesterday I was working on an HR employee manual and the second half of the day was applying for a working line of credit for a Sandy recovery loan. Paperwork.

**If you were stranded on a desert island and could take one beer, what would it be?**

CHRIS: Oh, I got to think about that one. Do you know, Ryan?

RYAN: Oh, Cape May IPA, and I'm not just saying that to be self-aggrandizing. I really like that beer a lot.

CHRIS: The problem is I like drinking so many different ones.

RYAN: Maybe one that changes flavor over time.

CHRIS: I would say the barley wine we did, the Sawyer's Swap. Plus I could look at the label. [Editor's Note: Victor Grasso designed the label.]

RYAN: Aww, that's beautiful.

CHRIS: What about you Victor, what's your one beer?

**Russian Imperial Stout, without a doubt. So, what's the sexiest beer out there,**



Why is Ryan Krill the (frothy) face of Cape May Brewing Company? "It's his personality," says co-founder Chris Henke.

**the one that gets the ladies going?**

RYAN: Probably our strawberry wheat beer.

**And since this is the holidays issue, what would be a great Christmas beer?**

CHRIS: Apple Pie — it's our Apple Bomb but with spices. Cranberry beer is also nice this time of year.

**How do you decide on flavors? Is there a democracy or are you the witch doctor Chris?**

CHRIS: I try to make what we come up with work in a commercial setting.

RYAN: We have team picks where everyone gets to pick the beer they want to make. There are no limits...

CHRIS: Well, I might add a limit.

RYAN: Yeah, me too. We keep it within the legal boundaries. But one of the guys, Jim [Zolna] in the taproom, he wants to make a pineapple saison. I would never think to do something like that.

CHRIS: That's what keeps it interesting. If you have one person making a beer it's a reflection of them or what they want. Our guy Paul [Nease], he and I came up with the imperial stout recipe and what he chose to do is something I would never do, it's out of my comfort zone. I'm happy to do it because

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I want to get out of my comfort zone and if it were up to me that beer would be a lot blander. It's going to be a bold beer and it reflects Paul's personality.

RYAN: And that's what makes it fun. Our guys now have ownership in this place, they're a part of it, not just opening and closing valves. We're calling that beer Paul's Imperial Stout.

CHRIS: Sometimes a beer is made out of necessity. We brewed a saison with special French yeast but we had some left over and we had to come up with another beer to brew that yeast because yeast is expensive. And so Devil's Reach was born.

**Has there ever been a disaster where you were like, "God, we can't drink this?"**

RYAN: In theory, if a beer went bad you could add a turbo yeast to it — raise up the sugar real high and you could run it through a still and make good old fashioned moonshine. But that's only in theory.

**So, in theory, have you ever had a beer that you concocted that tasted like shit?**

CHRIS: The last time we did our cranberry early in the summer, we were experimenting with new forms of cranberry and way overdid it with the cranberry — it was super-tart beer. So out of that was born the

cranberry shandy. We added lemonade and once again it became one of our most popular beers.

**Do you think you'll be doing this for life or do you have any other ambitions?**

RYAN: I always wanted to be a boat-builder when I was a kid. But this is way too much fun, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

**You're a pilot, Ryan. How did that happen?**

RYAN: A few years ago my girlfriend Kaysi [Franceus] got me lessons at the flight school right here. I took a few lessons and I have always wanted to fly, always had model airplanes, I've been fascinated with it. It took me about a year and I got my private pilot certificate and now I can rent a plane and fly wherever I want. It's really, really cool, one of those hobbies that you're totally engulfed in and can't think of anything else.

**How often do you fly?**

RYAN: It varies, but I try to get up once or twice a week.

**What kind of plane?**

RYAN: Fixed wing, single engine, a Cessna 172.

**So that's a cocaine plane?**

RYAN: A cocaine runner, yeah, it's a

four-seater, single-engine airplane.

**Do you ever take anybody up for a spin?**

RYAN: Yeah, I'm trying to get Chris up.

**What do you guys do to relax?**

CHRIS: We're here.

RYAN: It's a ton of work running this thing. It doesn't feel like work but we're always thinking about it or doing it. It's a constant steady flow of brewery this and brewery that and everything is through the lens of that.

**Any favorite bars or restaurants?**

RYAN: Wherever we're on tap. Whenever we open up new bars and restaurants I like to go to all these places. I like going to Goodnight Irene's in Wildwood.

**What about Cape May?**

RYAN: Mad Batter, Lucky Bones, they both have great beer lists.

**Where do you guys live?**

RYAN: Avalon.

CHRIS: Philly, but I squat in Avalon.

**Do you guys hit the cities at all — Philly, New York — to see what's going on?**

CHRIS: Yeah, we love doing that. We go to Philly — great beer city, and lots of great breweries.

**Any specific ones?**

RYAN: Frankfurt Hall...



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CHRIS: Standard Tap, and I'm always impressed by Victory brewery.

RYAN: I like going to Yards.

**I just had Victory's Dirty Wolf last night for the first time.**

RYAN: How was it?

VG: Too citrusy for me man, no bitter hops at all. Tastes like grapefruit juice.

CHRIS: Well that's the hops; it's a different kind of hops, though.

RYAN: A lot of people are into that.

**Who are your beeroos?**

RYAN: What Sam Calagione has done with Dogfish Head is cool and inspiring. Taking it from nothing in Delaware to making something great. He does really interesting branding with the Grateful Dead Beer, the Pearl Jam Beer etc, and they're great partnerships for a craft brewery of that size because you're really getting national attention. Brilliant marketing.

CHRIS: Gene Muller from Flying Fish has helped us along since we started, and Yards brewery, which started off real small.

**Do you make a good living from this? Is it paying the bills?**

RYAN: Yeah, for sure. I don't have any mortgage so I'm able to do whatever I want to do. Travel, anything I want, which is

great. However, we take most of the money that we make and reinvest it in this. It's our intention to try to put it back into here, not get rich.

**So what do you think the connection is between beer and coffee? Why do beer guys like coffee so much?**

RYAN: Probably because you're hungover and you need to wake up. There's a lot more to coffee than Folger's, just like there's a lot more to beer than Budweiser.

CHRIS: As brewers we drink coffee to keep us going — there can be long days and you need that caffeine.

**So let's talk about food with beer. Do you think it's a marketing thing or do you think beer goes well with certain foods?**

RYAN: I just did a really successful event with the Virginia Hotel called Steers and Suds. It was a five-course meal and they paired all this different food with our beers. It was great. You pair complex food flavors with complex beers and simple foods with simple beers. For example a wheat beer or hefeweizen pairs very well with a fish prepared very simply, like sautéed with butter and lemon, whereas a steak or something heavy goes really well with a stout or IPA. Something that's going to have a lot of flavor

to cut and match the flavors of that steak.

**Do you guys drink wine at all? Or are you anti-wine?**

RYAN: I like wine, but it gives me a terrible hangover.

**Well, I didn't ask if you drink five bottles of wine at a time.**

RYAN: No, I'm telling you, one glass gives me a hangover.

CHRIS: I like nice dry wine, but going back to the pairings, I agree with Ryan but sometimes it goes too far. We have a saying at the brewery, "Don't over-think it, just drink it." I think sometimes with the pairings it can get over complex. My favorite pairings are when you do the opposite of complementing the food with the beer. It works well when you have really spicy food — go with something sweet like a barley wine or a sweet stout that has a maltiness to it. It helps cool your palate for that next bite, whereas the traditional pairing would be an IPA, a spicy beer, very hoppy. To me that makes it even spicier and so I like to look for the opposite instead of spicy with spicy and sweet with sweet.

RYAN: I wish there was an Indian place around here. I could go for Indian food right now. ■

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