



N.C. distiller Fair Game introduces sweet and smoky Tobago pepper vodka

By John S. Trump

<http://www.halfwaysouth.com/booze.html>

Kevin Bobal slid a tiny, nondescript plastic cup toward me.

It has a sweetness, he told me, referring to the clear liquid inside.

Bobal, who wore a grey flat cap and dark-rimmed glasses, watched as I got a nose of cotton candy and fresh-baked cookies, followed by a mouthful of sweet and smoky goodness.

So this is Tobago pepper, I said, blending question and declarative statement.

“Wow.”

Bobal, who handles sales, and master distiller Chris Jude laughed and smiled. They knew I would like it.

Flying Pepper Vodka is the latest release from Fair Game Beverage Co. in Pittsboro, North Carolina, a member of the N.C. Distillers Association and just one of dozens of stops on the state’s Craft Distillers Trail, a partnership with the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

On this Monday night, Jude and Bobal have set up shop at The Marshall Free House, a British-themed and -styled gastropub in Greensboro, North Carolina, featuring Jay Pierce, one of the best chefs anywhere.

The company's name, says Jude, pays homage to the agricultural season and harvest, which dovetails into a season of fairs, fun and parties.

Fair Game makes fortified wines — such as Tipper Scuppernog and Port-style Ferris — using grapes from the Haw River Valley — as well as an apple brandy and a rum — made from sorghum that Jude grows — called No'lasses, distilled in an Alembic copper-pot still. An amber rum, aged about 15 months, is on the way, Jude says.

Members of the N.C. Distillers “use a variety of N.C. products, such as apples, corn, wheat, rye, honey and even sweet potatoes to create their spirits,” Paul Jones, media marketing specialist for the ag department and consumer services, has told me.

“We use North Carolina agriculture in all the things we're producing,” Bobal says.

On this night, it was all about the pepper.

Waitresses in kilts split their time offering sublime appetizers and six unique cocktails, all highlighting the Flying Pepper vodka, which uses as its base North-Carolina-grown organic soft red wheat vodka from the TOPO distillery in Chapel Hill.

The Tobago pepper, also known as aji dulce, looks and smells a bit like the wickedly hot habanero, but it's exceedingly milder and super flavorful. Bobal likens the taste of the raw pepper — supplied to Fair Game by several North Carolina farms — to a stick of Juicy Fruit gum.

“There's really no other vodka out there on the market quite like this,” he says. “When you see a pepper vodka on the shelf, typically it's something that's going after a spice or a big black pepper flavor. No one's capturing this type of flavor profile.”

Well, aside from Fair Game and the distiller, Jude, who, some six years ago, learned about the pepper from a farmer whose property lies adjacent to the distillery. Jude took the unique and rare fruit to his liquid lab.

The majority of Fair Game's wines and spirits are aged in white oak Bourbon barrels. Aging, by definition, takes time, so Jude and his partners went to work on an un-aged spirit, and a natural progression ensued.

“To me, sorghum and the aji dulce, or Tobago pepper, are two of my favorite foods,” Jude says. “It (the Tobago) just works so well in the vodka.”

Flying Pepper is available throughout North Carolina — mostly in the metro areas — and Fair Game is looking to place it in stores in, for example, South Carolina, Atlanta and Washington, D.C. It's a good bet the so-called “big boys” will soon, in their best effort toward imitation, order Tobagos by the truckload.

So be it.

Says Bobal, “It will never be a Flying Pepper.”

Indeed.

This story also appeared in The Huffington Post.