



WATKINS AND McLAUGHLIN: TOP GUNS AT OLD LINE SPIRITS

By Teddy Durgin

There's a classic moment in the movie "Top Gun" when pilots Maverick and Goose land their fighter jet, high-five on the runway, and exclaim, "I feel the need ... the need for speed!" Well, former Naval Flight Officers **Arch Watkins** and **Mark McLaughlin** have felt the need ... the need for mead!

OK, more specifically the need for whiskey. They are the co-owners of Old Line Spirits, a craft distillery now up and running in Baltimore and offering small batch whiskey made of 100 percent malted rye. McLaughlin stated, "Arch and I were friends in the Navy and

lovers of fine whiskey. We met on active duty. We also spent time in the reserves. In the reserves, we were in the same squadron. So, we became closer friends then. And now we're neighbors in Baltimore. Arch really couldn't avoid me if he wanted to!"

Watkins added, "Mark went on to be a banker, and I was an engineer. We enjoyed both careers to a certain extent. But, at the end of the day, we wanted to own our own company and control the quality of a product going out the door. That's what makes it fun for us to get up in the morning."

A few years back, the two met Golden Distillery founder Bob Stilnovich while on a trip to Seattle. A fellow veteran, Stilnovich was on the verge of retiring. So, a deal was struck to sell his recipes to



Watkins and McLaughlin. The two lived in Washington State for a time to master the art of distilling under the older man's tutelage. When their apprenticeship was finished, they acquired Golden and moved the distillery to their hometown of Baltimore.

Watkins declared, "We both love the city and think there's lots of opportunity. We found a great, 25,000-square-foot warehouse in Highlandtown that was actually perfect for turning into a distillery. It had all the drains and the sprinklers. It has a nice, 5,000-square-foot courtyard that we could turn into an outdoor space for events. And there's easy access to I-95.

"Starting a distillery from the ground up is, of course, a very daunting endeavor. Watkins stated, "It's not just the real estate side. It's all of the regulations. It's putting a product into bottles that people will want to drink. Between the legal, the financial, the regulatory, the real estate, you kind of have to be a jack of all trades."

And there have been hard lessons to learn along the way. The biggest? McLaughlin replied, "You have to wait until a product is fully ready and fully mature. Put it on the market then and only then. Patience is really the best thing for a company in the long run."

Both have drawn on their time in the

military to help them through the rough patches. They agreed the Navy provided a more solid foundation for their new career than most would expect. "With regards to the beverage industry," Watkins said, "we benefit from having the ability to plan effectively and set goals. But when the rubber

meets the road, no plan survives first contact with anything. We spent a lot of time in the military planning missions, air strikes, and that sort of thing. You can have a great plan, but then it pretty much disintegrates, and you have to adapt. In this business, you are planning to the best of your ability and then your success depends on your ability to adapt to the reality of the marketplace."

And they have found a warm and welcoming industry for the most part. "Well," Watkins laughed at a memory, "one of the first things someone in the business did ask me was, 'Does your wife have a good job? She'll want to hold on to that!'"

But the more they talked to other distillers, the more assured they became. McLaughlin commented, "From the producer side, what Arch and I've found is that we've become part of an incredible community of other distilleries, wineries, and breweries. There's a real spirit of 'Let's help each other out!'"

Watkins concluded, "I don't think you could open a distillery in a better state than Maryland. Maryland is a thirsty state. The places that are opening tend to skew towards the higher end, which is great for craft. But there are still a lot of corner bars out there that will love having a couple of our bottles for their customers." ■

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