



# MINISTRY OF BREWING

THE CITY OF BALTIMORE IS BLESSED

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

**T**here are some people who treat beer drinking like it's a religious experience. The Ministry of Brewing in Baltimore has taken that to a whole other level. The brewery's operations are based in the former St. Michael's Church, which dates back to 1857. The combination of beer, food, and historical ambiance provides one of the most unique drinking and eating experiences around.

The Ministry is also the latest to be featured in our series of articles on funny or quirky-named bars, taverns, brewpubs, and beverage establishments in and around Maryland and Washington, D.C. Co-owner Ernst Valery is still tickled remembering back to the Ministry's creation six-plus years ago when he and co-owners Mike Powell and David Wendell came up with the name.

"David Wendell and I were looking to start a brewery, and we fell in love with the idea of a church brewery," he recalls. "There was one in Cincinnati that we took a look at potentially doing. And then we went and saw an actual one in Pittsburgh. Those were our early inspirations. I am a real estate developer, and our group redeveloped the entire St.

**Ernst Valery**  
**co-owner**  
**Ministry of Brewing**

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Michael's campus. We transformed the girls school, the boys school, and the rectory into apartments. Then when it came to the sanctuary, we said, 'Wait a minute. We've been looking at church breweries. We can put in a brewery. The name Ministry of Brewing was then born.'

He added, "We love the name, and we love the building. There's all this history that we get to take into the future and still have a community gathering space ... it's really cool."

The former St. Michael's had a storied history as a hub of community gathering and engagement. Many Charm City residents can still recall attending church services, christenings, and marriages there. The co-owners have gone to great lengths to respect this past by maintaining the essence of a local family gathering place.

Co-founder and brewer David Wendell commented, "What makes Ministry special to me is that it was a gathering place for people for over 150 years, and now it is again. The head brewer and I saved everything we could. We made the tables from old joists, with the burn marks from an 1890 fire still visible on some of them. It's a striking



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combination of history and renewal that makes the vibe unique. I enjoy walking into the cathedral-like space every time, it makes you feel smaller in a good way.”

Valery said, “Our core customer is the Baltimore City community and it’s over 150 neighborhoods and close to 600,000 residents. But we are also proud Marylanders and serve our entire state. We also get visitors from across the U.S. – mostly, the DMV [DC, Maryland, and Virginia], but also from around the globe.”

Co-owner Mike Powell concurred, adding, “I still love experiencing the ‘WOW!’ factor expressions on our guests faces the first time they enter the Ministry doors and see our grand and majestic space.”

Valery is the builder of the group, and Ministry of Brewing is a prime example of a type of development he has long specialized in – adaptive reuse. He remarked, “I have a history in adaptive reuse, and my background is urban planning. The whole point is to preserve the building, but then take it into the future. We converted the old Chesapeake Building so that it now has restaurants on the ground floor, offices on the second floor, and then above we put apartments.”

He continued, “Adaptive reuse is both a redevelopment tool and a revitalization tool. But you have to make sure it’s both viable and sustainable. A vibrant city has elements of a 24-hour nature to it. You want to have retail support the residential, and the residential must support the retail, as well. So, people are not just there at night and not just there during the day. There are different ‘shifts’ that happen.” The Chesapeake, for instance, is a 24-hour building. There are people there at different shifts all of the time, all day long.”

But the Ministry would be nothing if it didn’t produce quality ales.

Powell’s face lights up when he talks about the product: “I have several favorites, but I would choose our Brown Ale, Old Maude for sentimental reasons. Old Maude was the



first beer we brewed at Ministry, and it is named after the first train locomotive of its type built in the United States for the Baltimore & Ohio railroad, my favorite railroad growing up as a child.”

Wendell added, “My favorite part of production is thinking up new drink ideas with Dave Macala, our head brewer. He makes great things without my help of course, but I try to dream up fun, science-informed combinations. Not all of my ideas are winners though, but we learn something from every experiment!”

Challenges, though, remain in all facets of the business. Valery stated, “We found COVID to be very challenging, and the recovery continues to be hard and slow. The event was a super shock to our system, and we are working through efforts to bring more people back out to

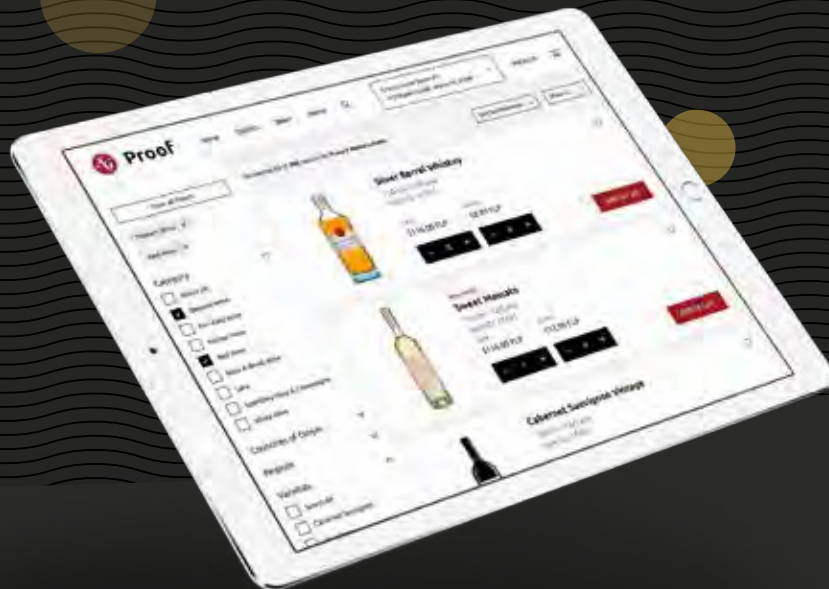
gather in greater numbers . . . and getting our beer outside of our city and state! We continue to look for partners and opportunities in other states and even internationally.”

Indeed, last year, the partners were able to transform a warehouse into an off-site production facility that includes a brewing system and canning line. They are now able to produce enough cans



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this country with so much potential, including adding more special and private events, a kitchen to provide food, and expanding the Ministry distribution footprint through cans in and beyond the greater Baltimore market. I am eternally optimistic!" ■

to really get the Ministry's beers out into the Maryland marketplace more.

Asked about challenges, Powell responded, "One of our biggest is trying to predict how consumers' tastes will shape the future of the beverage market over the next three to five years." To this, he believes the Ministry is "ahead of the curve."

And all three men believe the future is bright for the business and the City of Baltimore, in general. Valery remarks, "The bev-

erage industry is a people business. Nothing brings people together like some good drinks, particularly beer! To be in this business, you need to constantly stay optimistic. My partners and I are proud of the great product we put out in the community and market every day, and it's the reason why we believe the best is yet to come for the Ministry and Baltimore City in 2025 and beyond."

Powell concluded, "We have one of the best community 'gathering place' spaces in



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