The art of brewing, along with its delicious results, were among Thomas Jefferson’s multitude of interests. A man of science, he relished experimentation — including with beer, the “table liquor” that was so ubiquitous at meals in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Once retired from public life, Jefferson immersed himself in the science of brewing. His success was in large part due to a chance encounter with a British brewer detained near Charlottesville, Virginia, during the war of 1812. Captain Joseph Miller came to Monticello in 1813 to brew ale, which had a uniquely robust shelf life. He trained one of Jefferson’s slaves, Peter Hemings, a cook and tailor, who eventually became the resident “malter and brewer,” as Jefferson wrote to President James Madison.

Hemings learned brewing “with entire success.” Confident in Hemings’s skill as a brewer, Jefferson suggested to Madison that he send a pupil to Monticello to learn brewing, writing that “our malter and brewer is uncommonly intelligent and capable of giving instruction.”

At first, Jefferson bought malt from his Monticello neighbor William Meriwether and obtained hops locally in Charlottesville. But by fall 1814, there was a brewhouse at Monticello and Jefferson had begun malting his own grain. The location and design of the brewhouse are still unknown, although an undated drawing shows a plan and elevation.

Monticello’s brewing process began with mashing, or adding malt to hot water to extract fermentable sugars. Rather than using barley, Jefferson relied on wheat and corn. He used a bushel of malt for every 8 or 10 gallons of strong beer, noting that “public breweries” produce 15 gallons from every bushel, which “makes their liquor meagre and often vapid.”

Keepers of rural homesteads brewed it in their kitchens for their own use, taverns sold beer to local customers, and breweries in large cities offered weary travelers malt liquor and a place to debate the politics of the day.

Jefferson’s wife, Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, oversaw the family’s beer-making operations early in their marriage, brewing 15-gallon batches almost every two weeks when she first arrived at Monticello in 1772.

By Natalie Ermann Russell

SOMETHING’S BREWING

Beer at Monticello, then and now
The liquid (aka wort) that resulted from mashing was then strained. Three quarters of a pound of hops were added for every bushel of malt. Finally, the hops were strained out of the wort and yeast was added, beginning the fermentation process.

Once the beer had been kegged, it needed to rest for at least two weeks in a cool, still place before being tapped. Jefferson preferred storing beer in bottles, and with each brewing season came the rush to order bottles and corks in time for production. He insisted on the highest quality corks: “I shall want a supply of good corks to bottle our beer and cyder, as soon as they can be got. It is so provoking to lose good liquor by bad corks,” he wrote in 1819.

Several years earlier, during fall 1814, Jefferson pulled off one of his first successful brewing, likely in the new brewhouse. That same year, Hemings first experimented with making malt from corn. Letters written at the time show that perhaps this corn beer was served in silver tumblers (later known as “Jefferson cups”) to guests who visited Monticello.

By 1815, the “census of bottles” tallied 950 glass quarts, 50 quart jugs and 105 “pottle” jugs (each of which held two quarts), for a total of 1,210 quarts. By the following year, production was up by almost 10 percent, to 340 gallons.

Word spread of Jefferson’s prodigious brewing operation. Former Virginia governor James Barbour wrote him to request the recipe: “Some years past I recollect to have drunk some ale at Monticello which I understood was of your own brewing. The manner of doing which you had obtained by a recipe from some intelligent Briton … you will oblige me much by furnishing me with a copy of the recipe as soon as your convenience will permit.”

Jefferson replied that he had no recipe. “I much doubt if the operations of malting & brewing could be successfully performed from a [recipe]. … If you have a capable [servant] and he were to attend our fall brewing, so as to get an idea of the manual operation, [it] might qualify him.”

In recent years, Monticello has restored Jefferson’s beer cellar, offering a glimpse into the brewing operation through the lives and stories of the people who made it happen.

An undated sketch of Jefferson’s design for a brewhouse

At first glance, Monticello Mountain Ale is a delicious, relatively simple beer: two-row pale barley malt, a small amount of crystal malts, and German and English hops. What sets it apart is the terroir: a touch of honey harvested from Monticello’s own beehives. The bees help pollinate Monticello’s gardens, and in turn, provide a taste of the nearby land for the beer.

“Whether you try it at Monticello or at one of our Blue Mountain Brewery locations, Monticello Mountain Ale is a must-have beer for 2022,” says Taylor Smack, founder of Blue Mountain, which collaborated on the project.

In keeping with what would have graced Thomas Jefferson’s dinner table, Monticello Mountain Ale is only 5.5% ABV — a moderate beverage for daily consumption.

“We started the Monticello Mountain beer project before the pandemic, and we knew we wanted to partner with a local brewery with similar values,” says Jennifer Lyon, Monticello marketing and communications manager. “After meeting Taylor, we knew that Blue Mountain would be the perfect fit. Like Monticello, they are focused on sustainability, investing in community, and high-quality products.”

www.bluemountainbrewery.com

Monitoring equipment at Blue Mountain Brewery