

Pushing East Coast Wine Forward

An Interview with Jeremy Ligon,
Director of Production and Head Winemaker, Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery

EDITORS' NOTE *Jeremy Ligon is a second-generation winemaker and Virginia native focused on pushing East Coast wine forward. His path into winemaking started early – at just 14 years old, his family planted a vineyard, and Ligon grew up working the land, learning first-hand that great wine is built long before it reaches the cellar. Driven to master both craft and science, Ligon headed west to earn a BS degree in enology with a minor in chemistry from California State University, Fresno, one of the country's most respected wine-making programs. He returned to Virginia in 2012 with a clear goal: to help redefine what Virginia wine can be – and to prove it belongs on the national stage.*



Jeremy Ligon

WINERY BRIEF *Nestled in the rolling hills of Virginia's Piedmont, Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery (barreloak.com) is where craftsmanship meets connection. There, award-winning wines and bold small-batch brews are paired with warm hospitality and sweeping Blue Ridge views. Whether gathering with family, celebrating with friends, or discovering a next favorite pour, every moment at Barrel Oak feels like home.*

Will you discuss your career journey?

My winemaking career journey started early. I'm a second-generation winemaker and Virginia native, and when I was 14 my family planted a vineyard. Growing up, working on the land taught me that great wine is built in the vineyard long before it reaches the cellar.

To deepen that foundation, I earned a bachelor of science degree in enology with a minor in chemistry from California State University, Fresno. I was fortunate enough to work directly under Master of Wine Kenneth Fugelsang, my mentor and advisor at Fresno State. After completing my studies, I returned to Virginia in 2012 with a clear goal: to help elevate Virginia wine and demonstrate that it belongs on the national stage.

Since then, my work has been recognized through industry honors and awards, including being named Virginia's number 1 Up-and-Coming Winemaker to Watch in 2014 and a finalist for the 2025 SommCon Imprint Emerging Leader Award. My wines have earned Best in Class and Double Gold distinctions and

have been featured in national publications, reinforcing my commitment to pushing East Coast wine forward.

Will you highlight the history of Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery?

Barrel Oak was founded in 2006 in Virginia's Piedmont region, just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It sits at the heart of the Middleburg AVA, one of the state's most distinctive wine-growing regions. Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery has always been more than a destination – it's a place rooted in land, family, and community. What began as

a small vineyard has grown into a 78-acre estate with a 30-acre vineyard producing ten varietals, including Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, and Virginia's native Norton.

In 2022, Barrel Oak entered a new chapter when Kavelle and Ken Bajaj, a local family from Upperville, became stewards of the property. Guided by Kavelle's passion for honoring the land and preserving its history, the winery continues to evolve while remaining deeply connected to its roots. Barrel Oak's commitment to hospitality and togetherness has earned



Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery in Virginia (above and opposite page)



consumers who recognize and appreciate the quality of East Coast wines, but for the broader wine-drinking public, the region is still not top of mind when seeking premium bottles, though it absolutely should be. Many East Coast wines consistently stand toe-to-toe with renowned West Coast and European producers in prestigious national and international competitions, often earning equal or higher scores. However, that success has yet to fully translate into widespread consumer perception.

Encouragingly, interest in and education around high-quality East Coast wines – particularly Virginia – continues to grow, but there is still significant ground to cover. Ongoing wine education and outreach are essential, especially as we work to engage the next generation of wine drinkers. Wine consumers are often creatures of habit, shaped by decades of exposure to West Coast American and European wines that have long dominated the market. Convincing established wine drinkers to step outside their usual choices and explore wines from New York, Maryland, or Virginia remains a challenge, but one that presents tremendous opportunity for the region.

What has made the wine industry so special for you?

Winemaking is special because it allows me to create something truly expressive using my hands, knowledge, and experience to craft a work of art that can be shared with others. Each decision made throughout the long growing and winemaking season becomes a direct reflection of that vintage and the conditions of the year, allowing the grapes and the land to speak for themselves. My family has farmed Virginia soils for generations, and this industry gives me the opportunity to continue that legacy as both a farmer and a winemaker. I'm involved in every stage of the process, from winter pruning to fermentation and bottling, always beginning with the end in mind and making thoughtful choices to produce something meaningful year after year.

Sharing these wines with visitors – talking through recent vintages and watching people enjoy something we grew from the ground and crafted with intention and care – is deeply rewarding. It also allows me to pass on the values of hard work, dedication, farming, and the balance of art and science to my family, with the hope of helping shape the next generation of Virginia winemakers.

What are your priorities for Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery as you look to the future?

Our top priority, for both the winery and the brewery, is producing high-quality, premium wines and beers. Looking ahead, we want Barrel Oak to become the go-to Virginia brand for wine drinkers eager to discover something new, as well as for markets beyond the state seeking to bring a distinctive Virginia producer into their portfolios. Our near-term focus is thoughtful expansion along the East Coast, with a long-term vision that extends nationwide and eventually worldwide. Growth, however, will always be intentional and quality driven. We are committed to never compromising quality for quantity – a philosophy that begins in the vineyard. ●

international recognition, including *Wine Enthusiast's* distinction as the “Most Family-Friendly Winery in the World.”

Will you provide an overview of Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery's offerings?

At Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery, I'm proud to be part of a team that crafts a diverse portfolio of wines and small-batch beers reflecting the spirit of Virginia. On our estate, we grow Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, and other classic and regional grape varieties, combining traditional winemaking practices with modern techniques to bring out the best in each bottle. As a second-generation Virginia winemaker, my approach centers on balance, terroir, and letting the fruit speak for itself. Since joining Barrel Oak in 2021, I've focused on elevating our portfolio with wines that are precise, authentic, and deeply connected to our place, sharing the story of our land in every glass.

Complementing the winery, Barrel Oak's brewery produces handcrafted beers made with the same care, creativity, and attention to detail as its wines, led by Brewmaster Youngjin Oh, a Certified Cicerone whose blend of technical precision and creative vision results in distinctive beers that elevate the overall Barrel Oak experience.

What can guests expect when visiting the winery?

At Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery, guests are invited to slow down and settle in. Set on a scenic 78-acre estate in Virginia's Piedmont, the winery pairs vineyard views with inviting indoor and outdoor spaces designed for connection and comfort. Grounded in genuine hospitality and a commitment to premium Virginia wines, Barrel Oak offers a relaxed yet refined atmosphere – welcoming, unpretentious, and thoughtfully inclusive – where everyone is made to feel like they belong.

Do you feel that the quality of East Coast wine is well understood?

Not nearly to the extent it deserves to be. There is a dedicated and growing segment of

