

MARYLAND-BASED BEVERAGE GROUP

Finds New Prestige in Howard County



BY TED DURGIN

This fall has been an exciting time for Maryland's own Prestige Beverage Group. In October, the company held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for its new offices in Elkridge, having completed its move from much smaller digs in Curtis Bay. At that event, managing partners Bill Burrill and Joey Smith also teamed with Berrywine Plantations/Linganore Winecellars to present Johns Hopkins' Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center with a check for \$8,566 – the result of a charitable initiative the two Maryland beverage companies have collaborated on throughout the current year. In attendance were such luminaries as Linganore Winecellars President Anthony Aellen and Ian Kennedy, deputy chief of staff for Howard County. And in November, Prestige celebrates its third year in business.



Prestige Beverage Group outside their new offices in Elkridge, MD.

Burrill, during a recent sitdown interview with the *Beverage Journal*, remarked, "Joey Smith and I have known each other for a long time. We got together and purchased Chesapeake Beverage Company. We are in business in Washington, D.C.; Maryland; and Delaware. So, we're a true Mid-Atlantic company. The company is solely owned by Joey and myself. There is no outside interest. We both live in Maryland, and All of our profit stays right here in Maryland."

For both men, it's become a real point of pride being so Maryland-centric. "There are very few locally owned distributors in the state of Maryland," Burrill noted. "The top guys all have out-of-state ownership. Retailers like the fact that they can deal with working owners. We're here every day. We're either in this building or out seeing customers or visiting with suppliers. But when our customers call us, they are talking to the only decision-makers. We're dealing owner to owner, and they really like that. That's the reason for our growth!"

The love for Maryland extends to the recent team-up with Linganore for Hopkins. The two companies have made a donation for every case of wine that has been sold this year. The \$8,566 check was for what the initiative had generated through September.

Burrill stated, "It's good business. It's really a win-win for everybody. We

chose Johns Hopkins, number one, for the work they do. But number two, we're all three local businesses. We're all three Maryland –Hopkins, Linganore, and Prestige. So, we're keeping our donation in Maryland. It's a cooperative thing, and it's great having gotten to a point where now we're able to give back a little bit."

Michael C. Hibler, senior associate director of development for Johns Hopkins Medicine, was on hand at the Oct. 12 ribbon cutting to accept the check on the facility's behalf. He commented, "We've known members of the Smith family for many years now at Hopkins. Generations have supported our work, and it's really nice to see Joey following in the footsteps of his family. The fact that there is a new generation who is succeeding, who has his heart in the right place, is a great story for the Smith family. When you can bridge a great cause with a great company and reach out to people in the community, that's a success on all counts. One of the things I have found remarkable about Joey and Prestige has been their energy. They approached us, saying, 'We have this idea. Can we make it work?' What's also remarkable is that a company like Linganore is right here on our backyard. They're in our backyard, Prestige Beverage is in our backyard, and we're obviously in that yard. So, you could say that we are the best that Maryland has to offer."

Smith's family has indeed been in the wholesale wine and spirits

business for decades, ever since Prohibition. The Smiths founded Reliable Liquors, which merged with the Charmer Sunbelt organization in 2001. Joey Smith is now the third generation to be a business owner in Maryland. "It's a unique industry," he said. "Once most people start in it, they don't leave. And that goes for all levels – suppliers, wholesale, retail. There are a lot of family-owned businesses that have been passed down from generation to generation. There are not too many industries left like this."

For his part, Burrill has been in the beverage business for 35 years. He has worked on the supplier side with St. Pauli Girl and Gallo, as well as spent a number of years heading the sales and management of various wholesalers. His dream, though, was to establish a Mid-Atlantic company that would service retailers in the region.

"I have been in the business for 35 years," he stated, "most of it in Maryland. I've moved away and come back four times. This is my absolute last stop! I'm like a bad



Bill Burrill and Joey Smith, both managing partners at Prestige Beverage Group; perform the ribbon cutting at the new offices.

penny. You think you've gotten rid of me, and I always turn up."

Burrill continued, "I've been in the business since the day I got out of college. It's the only full-time job I've ever had. I started on the wholesale side. I left and went on the supplier side for a while and then went back to the wholesale side. It's a unique business. We deal with retailers, restaurateurs, wholesalers, and suppliers in this industry who are generally really good people. It's

a competitive business, but it is a fun business. We deal with a lot of interesting and different personalities. We get to do a lot of neat things. We represent wines from every part of the world. I just got back from Chile. When you tend to be in this for five years, you have a moment where you realize, 'This is a really fun industry!' And people just tend to stay in it. I almost left one time. I was recruited by Quaker Oats, and I'm glad that I didn't take it. Selling corn flakes

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would not be nearly as fun as selling Liganore wine!"

In turn, both Burrill and Smith enjoy partnering with other beverage professionals who share their passion and their longevity in the industry. One such man, of course, is Liganore's Aellen. "I'm going on 40 years doing this," Aellen remarked. "We planted our first grapes in 1972 and started the winery in '76. My grandfather was making wine in his basement and that's basically how the winery started. It was a hobby that just got grossly out of hand. My father, who just passed away on Sept. 22, started the winery. I went to college the first two years as Pre-Med and found that I had no love for medicine. So, I switched my major to oenology and finished my education out in California. I came back and, by 1984, he found out that I made better wines than he did. So, he said, 'Here, you do it.' Now, my daughter will graduate from Cornell this year with a degree in Oenology and Viticulture, and she'll probably

work out in the field, in the industry, for two or three years before coming back. At some point in time, I suspect she'll be making better wines than I do and I'll be the one to say, 'Here, you do it!' Generation to generation is typically what you find in the wine industry, just like the Smith family."

Aellen was among those impressed with Prestige's new offices, which are located on Business Parkway in Elkridge right off of Route 1 and Route 100. The building is brand new and accommodates the firm's expanding staff. "We were in a facility down in Curtis Bay," Burrill confirmed. "We had the same landlord there as we do here. He had this new facility, and he offered us the opportunity to come to a much bigger space. So, it's very exciting. With our rate of growth, we would have needed to move before long. This just worked out great. It's a perfect location. We're 15 minutes from downtown Baltimore. We're close to D.C. We have Columbia right here. Dealing with all three states, Joey and I spend a lot of time up and down I-95. I have a car that will be one year old come December, and I have 28,000 miles on it."

For Burrill, Smith, and staff, the miles melt away when they see the end result of all their hard work. Prestige Beverage Group's portfolio includes everyone from Boordy, Liganore, and Sivas of Sonoma on the wine side to Caffo Liqueurs and Smokehead Scotch among spirits to such beer brands as Hook & Ladder

and Singha. And, of course, the end result will likely include more corporate social responsibility outreach efforts similar to the one with Hopkins.

Hibler concluded, "It's fulfilling to see that we can connect with Prestige and Liganore and have a relationship that is focused on helping cancer patients and their families. October has been Breast Cancer Awareness Month. But I think every month should be some type of Cancer Awareness Month, because everyone has been touched by cancer. If we can take a step back and educate the community through promotions and connections like this one, it starts to demystify some of the mythology about cancer." ■



Prestige Beverage Group managing
partners, Bill Burrill and Joey Smith, with
Anthony Aellen (center), president of
Liganore Winecellars.

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