

Louisvillian makes America's only micro-brewed soy sauce

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Written by Steve Kaufman | Contributing Writer

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When Matt Jamie holds a handful of soy beans to his nose, you'd think he was sniffing fragrant roses or exotic perfume.

His eyes close, he inhales deeply, nods and smiles.

But Jamie's passion isn't just for the soy beans themselves. It's also for the soy sauce he produces through Bluegrass Soy Sauce Co. – the result of an aging, filtering and brewing process in bourbon barrels in a back room of the Butchertown Market on Story Avenue.

Jamie's Bluegrass brand is the only micro-brewed, small-batch, single-barrel soy sauce produced in the U.S. And if it doesn't yet have the same cultural allure that Kentucky's bourbon has, it's because people haven't been sufficiently educated about the differences between this one-of-a-kind sauce and the packets or bottles they shake onto their Chinese food or into their Bloody Mary concoctions.

"We've been conditioned to think of soy sauce as an unexceptional commodity," said Jamie, who is also president of Bourbon Barrel Foods, a maker of gourmet products. "Who doesn't have a thousand of those little packets in their refrigerators?"

In fact, soy sauce is the No. 1 condiment in the world, mass-produced throughout Asia.

Jamie's soy sauce is different because he uses non-genetically modified soy beans grown by a Kentucky farmer and limestone-filtered water, which courses beneath Kentucky. He ages his sauce in bourbon barrels cast off by Kentucky brewers and takes a small batch approach to brewing.



Matt Jamie brews Bluegrass Soy Sauce using local ingredients.
courtesy photo

"Kikkoman spills more in a day than I make in five years," he said.

Another differentiating element is Jamie's attention to detail. A trained chef, he knows that care and patience for the process can be as important as skill and ingredients. A guided tour of his spotless facility reveals that.

The barrel lids are carefully removed so visitors can inhale and appreciate the essences of the soy and wheat, the fermenting that comes from using sea salt, the faint aromas of oak and vanilla, the reddish brown color and the texture that coats your mouth "like a nice Bordeaux."

A painstaking manual process produces only a couple thousand bottles a month, each with a hand-lettered batch and bottle number.

"There's a growing appreciation for artisanal olive oil and vinegar," Jamie says. "There's no reason that can't happen with soy sauce, once people appreciate the differences of micro-brewing."

Bluegrass Soy Sauce is available at specialty stores such as Paul's and Lotsa Pasta and at the Work the Metal store on the ground floor of the Butchertown Market. Jamie's Bourbon Barrel Foods line includes pancake and biscuit mix, candles and soaps, sorghum, seasoning and Worcestershire and Kentuckyaki sauces.

"My soy sauce is a locally produced product that reflects the mystique of the bourbon country lifestyle," Jamie said. "But more than that, it's just a better, purer, more-intense product. You'll never go back to those cellophane packets."

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