

tour AND travel

A Cocktail in the Sun

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Bermuda, Jamaica, the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Turks & Caicos—all popular destinations for Charlotteans seeking sun and fun. As our local temperatures cool down, thoughts turn to warm getaways. Imagine sitting on the beach and enjoying a Rum Swizzle, a Bahama Mama, a Rum Punch, a Dark and Stormy or another signature cocktail from the Caribbean, Islander Ginger Beer, compliments of your SouthPark neighbor.

Morrocroft resident and brewer, Georgia Dunn Belk, knows a thing or two about the islands. She's a direct descendant of some of the earliest settlers of the 17th century British West Indies. She also knows a thing or two about island cocktails. Belk has a centuries-old historic home on Salt Cay, one of Turks & Caicos' Salt Islands, which is considered the Colonial Williamsburg of the Caribbean. She is bringing back part of the cultural legacy of her family's island home with the production of Islander Ginger Beer, its distribution extending from the southeastern US through the Caribbean.

Belk, CEO of the British West Indies Trading Company, spent years tracing her family's history. She is a descendant of Thomas Harriott, an early explorer of the New World. During his imperial voyage of 1585, he collected flora and fauna, including ginger root, which he presented to Queen Elizabeth I upon his return. She, in turn, gave it to her chefs who decided that their monarch, as the Virgin Queen, would benefit from additional male company. From this culinary endeavor, the first gingerbread men were made and over subsequent centuries became a holiday tradition.

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Georgia Dunn Belk's portrait by artist Chas Fagan of Charlotte, best known for his portraits and sculptures of US presidents as well as European royalty



Islander Ginger Beer is available at Reid's Fine Foods, Total Wine, Harris Teeter, Whole Foods, Earth Fare and other specialty stores and large retailers. (photo courtesy Michael Harrison Photography)



Georgia Dunn Belk's historic Salt Cay home, the White House, in Turks & Caicos (photo courtesy of Brent Winchener)



The eastern coast of North America, as seen by Thomas Harriott, during an early British voyage of exploration.

As Belk explains, “My long family history with this rhizome (ginger root), long known for its medicinal properties as well as its popular flavor profile, makes me an obvious heir to its culinary applications. When you combine my progenitors' endeavors with the centuries-old tradition of Caribbean families making moonshine, you can see that for me, brewing alcoholic ginger beer is literally in my DNA.”

Her research included multiple references to ginger beer, a distinctly New World beverage that is derived from ginger root, which along with its other main ingredients—cane sugar, citrus and spices—all flourish in the lush tropical islands of the Caribbean. According to *Turks and Caicos Weekly News*, “Ginger beer became the alcoholic beer of choice throughout the Caribbean for close to 200 years, and its popularity spread across the world. By the mid-19th century there were more than 4,000 breweries in the Great Britain and 1,500 in the United States and Canada dedicated to production of the drink. However, increased taxation on low percentage alcoholic products led to its decline as a fermented beverage. Consumers opted for a non-alcoholic version of the drink and added rum—a cocktail now known as the Dark and Stormy.”

Most people who are familiar with ginger beer today know it as a non-alcoholic soda or mixer (more like a spicy ginger ale). The popular Moscow Mule is made with ginger beer and vodka. But Belk decided to recreate and share the hard version of the drink that was such an essential part of island heritage and cuisine. Her unique recipe, which is five percent alcohol (typical of most beer), combines filtered water, cane sugar, ginger, citrus and secret spices. Thanks to Georgia Dunn Belk and her Islander Ginger Beer, you now can enjoy an historic and authentic island beverage right here in Charlotte as well as on your next trip to the islands.

Belk came to Charlotte from San Francisco in 2001 due to the merger of Bank of America with NationsBank. She discusses some of her favorite things about the Queen City: “Because I spend so much time out of the state as well as out of the country due to work, Charlotte's airport is central to my life. When I am in town, I appreciate the long growing season which gives us fresh fruits and vegetables at our farmer's markets from early spring to late fall, as well as all of the farm-to-table restaurants. Charlotte's public library system is one part of local government that can make us all proud. SouthPark's Morrison Library is a terrific resource for all aspects of my life—both work and pleasure.”