

COVER STORY

Richland Rum a rural Georgia success story

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Like most small communities in rural Georgia, it's quiet in downtown Richland, and there are plenty of places to park.

But there was even less going on in the city of 1,200 in Stewart County southeast of Columbus before Atlanta expatriate **Erik Vonk** opened the only single-estate rum distillery in the nation in 2011.

"At the time, all of the main street was boarded up," he said. "The [weekly] newspaper building and bank were the only buildings that had any activity. ... Now, we are in seven buildings."

About 8,000 tourists visited **Richland Rum** last year, and Vonk expects that to increase to 12,000 by the end of this year. Business is going so well that construction is under way in Brunswick on a second distillery due to open in September.

"This is being seen more and more as an example of how economic development of a rural town can be successful," he said.

Vonk was CEO of **Ranstad Staffing Services** until 1999, when he and wife Karin relocated full time to an 1,800-acre farm they had bought in Stewart County. He said he chose the area because it was rural yet just two hours from **Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport**.

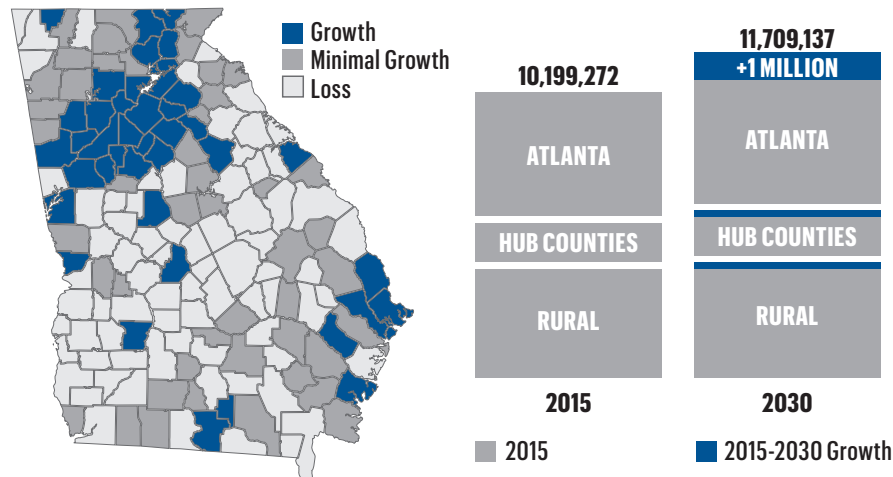
"We were looking for a country



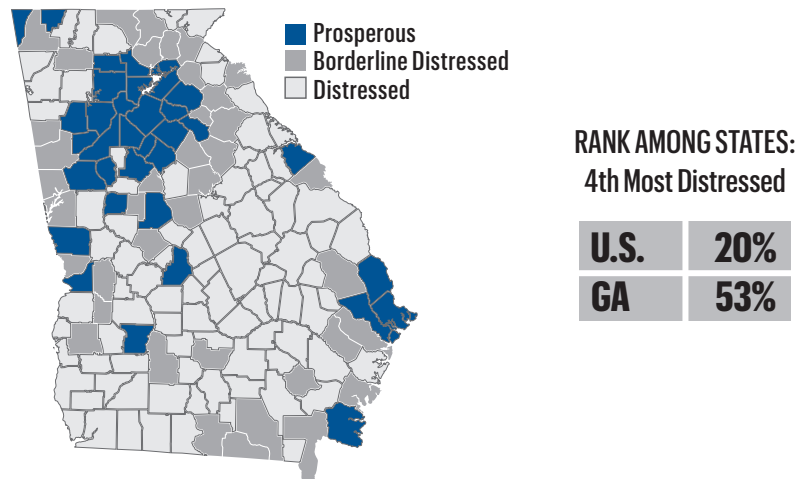
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Erik Vonk and his wife Karin started Richland Rum in Stewart County in 2011.

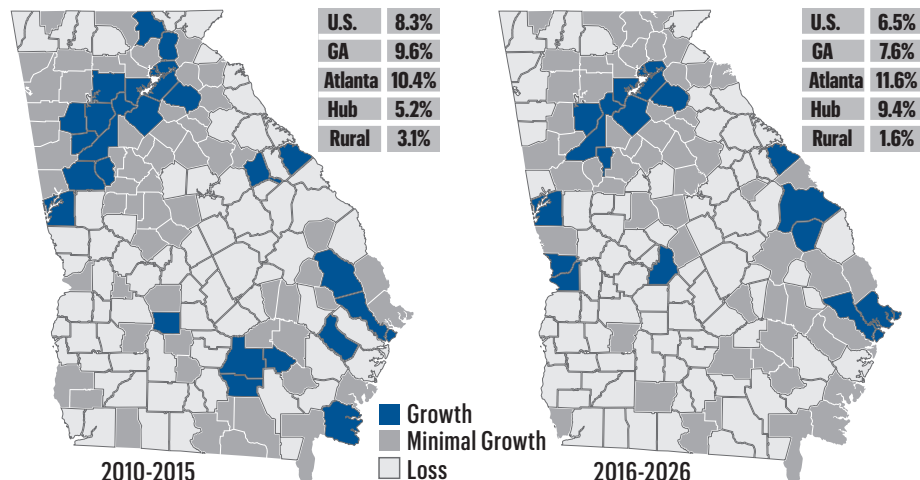
POPULATION GROWTH 2015 TO 2030



DISTRESSED COUNTIES



JOB GROWTH



SOURCE: JOBS EQ

2010 - 2015: 73 counties lost jobs
2016-26: 87 counties are projected to lose jobs
• 75% of the 352,000 jobs projected to be added will be added in Atlanta while only 8% will occur in rural GA. This is an even lower share than their population growth of 15%

environment, tranquility ... with an opportunity to grow sugar cane," he said.

In buying the farm, Vonk was fulfilling a lifelong dream he brought with him from his native Holland.

"My grandfather was a rum connoisseur," he said. "He had a collection of agricultural rum made directly from cane. ... When you make rum from unrefined cane, you've got a completely different product, a sipping drink. That's what grandpa was so fond of. That inspired me."

At first, Vonk built his distillery in a small metal building right on the farm. He said he was thinking about expanding that operation when Richland Mayor **Adolf McClendon** paid him a visit.

"The mayor drove up and said, 'You can't do that,'" Vonk said. "He said, 'I want you in downtown Richland.' I said, 'With all due respect, there's nothing there.' He said, 'Exactly! I want you there.'"

Thus was born Richland Rum, now housed in separate buildings containing a distillery, a fermentation room, a storage room for hundreds of barrels of rum, and a room hosting "rum events," including presentations by chefs in how to prepare various foods with rum or the pure cane syrup the distillery produces.

When Richland Rum first opened, customers were not allowed to taste the product due to Georgia's antiquated liquor laws.

That changed in 2015 when the General Assembly enacted a law that partly solved the problem. But craft breweries and distilleries in Georgia still are forced to play a game with customers.

"We still can't sell, but we can offer a tour with a 'souvenir,'" Vonk said. "If you don't want the souvenir, the tour is free. If you do want the souvenir, it's \$55. ... Almost all [Richland's customers] have bought rum, or officially, bought the tour."

But on Sept. 1 of this year, such indirect sales will be a thing of the past. A bill Georgia lawmakers passed this year will for the first time let craft brewers and distillers sell their products directly.

Along with tours of the downtown distillery, Vonk opens up his farm to tours of his 150 acres of sugar cane from late summer through harvest, which typically takes place between Thanksgiving and mid-December. Producing all of its rum from that one farm is what distinguishes Richland as single-estate rum.

But even with the new law, Richland Rum does most of its business through distributors. Vonk said Richland Rum is available in bars, restaurants and liquor stores in 15 states and nine countries. The distillery won an award earlier this year as Georgia's fastest-growing exporter.

With the legal shackles on the industry finally about to come off, Vonk said the future for Richland Rum looks bright.

He said he expects to add to the five employees now working for him in Richland. The Brunswick distillery will start with seven and could double its workforce within six months if all goes well, he said.

"The Georgia legislature has finally been wise enough to untighten the alcohol laws," Vonk said. "If they hadn't done that, we would not have opened a second distillery in Brunswick."



Richland Rum stores hundreds of barrels of rum on site.

BYRON E. SMALL