

Planning Your Tap Room: Our Experience

Part 2

By Carol Cochran, Horse & Dragon Brewing Co.

Planning Your Tap Room or Tasting Room: Our Experience Part 2 continues discussion from Part 1, which focuses on determining your goal for your space, square footage considerations, and finding your location.

Now that you have selected a specific location based on the considerations in Part 1, we move forward into the more specific and very important items that will be essential to the character and functionality of the space.

Other things to plan, consider, and budget for as you design:

- Set a mood: “warm & welcoming” “cool and trendsetting” “avant-garde” “whimsical” “manufacturing chic” “clinically precise,” “farm and country” and so on, and outfit accordingly wherever possible.
- Connectivity and entertainment: wifi connection, POS location(s), telephones (fire department may require one landline dedicated to sprinkler alert), TVs, speakers or other sound equipment, dual-use stage area
- What’s on the walls? (Permanent art, space to display rotating shows, posters, menus, your great-aunt’s macramé masterpiece....)
- Tables/chairs/barstools or other seating – look, comfort, cost, ease of cleaning, longevity. Can they reflect some part of your mission/goals? (e.g., we used reclaimed wood for our tables. If your theme is honoring heavy metal, that’s likely not the look you want!)
- Table-top items (menus and/or displays, flowers, coasters, etc.)
- Restroom supplies, storage in the restrooms themselves – this seems minor, but can make the difference between having guests take care of themselves and you having to drop everything to replace toilet paper or plunge a toilet. (You will still have to do both of these things at times!)
- Placement of waste and recycling containers both in the TR and in an outdoor collection spot – fenced or otherwise hidden, and if so, how?
- Security alarm system

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- Merchandise display solution and additional storage -- Disneyland model (have to walk through it to get in or out) or subtler placement? On display only, or customers able to shop hands-on?
- Tours – will you offer them? Paid or free, pre-scheduled or on demand? Safety considerations (e.g., chem-resistant painted guidelines on the floor, roped/chained off areas for guests' and guides' safety, PPE for participants). Will you have a separate staff person(s) dedicated to giving tours or is the TR staff trained and not too busy to do this?

A few things to consider before staffing up:

- Table service, or order-at-the-bar?
- Food delivery – at the bar, at the table, from a food truck, to-go snacks from a cabinet?
- Anticipated foot traffic – this is a hard one when you're first opening. 7 years in we still haven't settled into a routine on this – some weekends are busy, some are dead, some random days end up crushing us and others are abysmal, but it seems there is no predictable pattern to this. We have tried to decipher the rationale (payday weekends, when a public holiday falls on the second Monday, if there's a snowstorm followed by bright sun – we have explored every possible nuance and never reliably nailed it).
- Consider training needed – both company-specific, and industry-centric (e.g., cicerone training? Beer & food pairing? Sensory?).

Planning your staffing needs:

You've planned out your space. You're starting building it out. You're brewing your beer. Who is going to be your front line? Before you start interviewing folks to join your team, make sure you've developed your mission statement, core values, goals, or whatever outline you care to use to define what you're about. Interviewees can get a bit of a sense of where you're trying to go by hearing them, and you both can get a sense of whether or not they're going to buy into that and be a great representative for your brewery.

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Another decision that is critical to your staff and needs to be made prior to interviewing is your payment model. Think through the various options and develop a comprehensive plan that makes sense both for you and your team. Make sure you consider tipped minimum wage + tips, “real” wage + tips, living wage + no tips, pooled tips within service staff and/or back-of house, service charge model (can be distributed at manager’s or owner’s discretion), etc.

My best advice here is to take advantage of family and friends who want to help you open by training them to help your opening few weekends, when you will likely have a big bump of customers checking you out, many of whom may not be regular and recurring guests (reporters, beer folks trying to hit every brewery that opens, etc.). Employ them with the understanding (on their part) that they will not be full-time employees moving forward. Train them well, and have your key team members in place who will be with you for the longer haul, but I would advocate trying to avoid over-hiring and then having to lay people off when that initial bump calms down a bit. There are others who would argue the opposite – you want your guests to have a flawless experience, especially when they’re checking you out for the first time, and if that comes at the expense of having some folks employed for only 3 months, so be it.

Future Growth

As you plan and design, consider how to build in room for flexibility on every part of the project. For example, how and where might you add taps in the future, if you expand your concurrent offerings, and how will your future lines run to them? If you can’t afford an insulated glassed overhead (garage) door opening to your patio now, how might you place tables, windows, doors, and support so that you can add it in the future? If you can’t afford a dishwasher now or don’t think you’ll need it with your initial traffic, are you able to leave space behind your bar for it to be added? If so, get the electrical and water needs set to that location from the start. Can you place piping, drainage, and electrical in locations that provide multiple options in the future for where you locate your appliances, your 3-stage sink, your handwashing sink? [I use this last example because when we planned our TR, we located the 3-stage sink facing the front door, assuming that most days we would be very slow, and a single team member could be washing while still keeping an eye on the door to greet guests. It’s terribly cumbersome on busy days to have that deep 3-stage sink between you and the customers! But because of how we located them, it’s also quite a hassle to tie into our now-under-cement drains to accommodate it anywhere else.]

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A final word:

Accept that (unless you have bottomless financing), your tap room or tasting room will never be perfectly as you would like it. Make a giant list of everything you wish you could include, and then hack away at it given your priorities and budget. And as you cut things, put those that you can still employ “one day” on a list to save, and design the remainder with those “one day” improvements in mind. Keep in mind that the most important elements are your beer and your people. Everything else is secondary and can be taken care of as time and budget allow.

With all best wishes as you set out on your journey!



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Carol founded Horse & Dragon Brewing Company in 2014 with her husband Tim. She has an enormous appreciation for the community of Fort Collins, the Horse & Dragon team, and the craft brewing community.