

# Planning Your Tap Room: Our Experience

## Part 1

By Carol Cochran, Horse & Dragon Brewing Co.

Congratulations on joining us all in the Dream, and thanks for doing some planning on how you can add to the craft beer world! Here are a few things we learned when planning our tasting room, and a bit of a roadmap to get you started on thinking about yours.

One of the first things to consider, when planning for a tap room or tasting room, is to determine what your goal is for your space. I use “tap room” (retail model) to define a space that functions as a bar, with the goal of extensive beer-for-here and merchandise sales, encouraging people to come in for a few pints and snacks or a meal, and using the space as a potentially large (and sometimes the only) profit center for your brewery. The alternative, which I call a “tasting room” (wholesale model), is a space where fans come to sample what you’re currently working on and serving up and/or to see the space where your beer is made, but the majority of your sales are likely to be outside of the brewery’s four walls. In reality your beer-drinking space might serve as a combination of both of these, but your focus on one or the other may help determine a lot in your “planning” phase – particularly with location, size, layout, and staffing. After you’ve leaned one way or another on what type of business this space will be, a lot of the planning process entails similar tasks for either model, so I’ll refer to this general space as your “TR” below.

Think about how you want your TR situated as compared to your brewing space. Do you want it in the same building/on the same lot? Do you want guests to be able to see the brewery in action, or have that relatively separated? If you plan to have your brewing space adjacent to and not separated from your TR and that’s legal in your area, take into account safety considerations, hazard controls, and signage that will keep guests informed and out of the way of the operations of the brewery, and consider what will be on view to guests when your brewing team is working (do you want to shield your brewers from the goldfish bowl effect, or expose them to it?).

Getting to square footage:

Once you’ve decided what your model will be, do some calculations to figure out how much beer you’re going to need to make and sell in order to pay your people and your bills. This informs how much space you’re going to need for your brewhouse, fermenters, brite tanks, and serving tanks (if you’re using the latter), as well as packaging equipment and supplies, ingredients, other equipment, and dry storage.

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Next, use that number (barrels or pints of beer you need to sell –making some assumptions about how many pints or tasters you can plan to sell to the average guest, and then laying out a realistic goal for how many folks will come in on any given Sunday, Monday Tuesday, etc.) to plan space for the number of seats you’re going to try to fill. Keep in mind that all this space will most likely not be full for most of time, even if your brewery is a gigantic success, so don’t get yourself into a situation where you’ve got a huge mortgage or monthly rent bill that you can only pay if you are chock-full, turn over every 45 minutes, and are making hundreds of beer & merch sales every waking hour of the day. But for starters, think about on an ideal Saturday, when you may have to turn a few folks away but would like to accommodate most of them -- what number of people would that look like in your taproom at any given moment? [If it ends up that you cannot afford the space for this number of people, then embrace having to turn folks away on busy days and only be able to accommodate everyone on Tuesdays, and know that those turned away will make the effort to come back and fill your seats some other day!]

Now design your ideal TR space, starting with your bar and kitchen (if needed), sized to accommodate the amount of service you anticipate providing. Add in a combo of tables/bar seats to accommodate your “number of seats” figure reached above. Add restrooms (check your local building code for the number you need, and I’d advocate for factoring in gender-neutral accommodations, though they are generally not yet legally required), offices/break room (or some multi-purpose combo of those), and staff lockers or staff storage space. Consider including a staff bathroom with a shower to enable employees to bike to work, work out during lunch, etc. and clean up as needed [this can go in your brewery space, rather than your TR space, if your brewery and TR are at the same location]. And include a utility closet (cleaning supply storage, mops, etc.)! Don’t forget outdoor space if you desire that, and room for artwork, a stage, or other uniquely-your-brewery areas.

Be sure to leave some space for whatever it is you (and I) have forgotten – storing the cornhole sets when it’s snowing outside, the holiday decorations you use every year, the extra pallet of Crowler cans you ordered, dog water bowls, etc. When you look at possible spaces – your next step – if some allow for more of this “I forgot!” space than others, give that some weight in your decision making.

Unless you are designing your space from the ground up, try to remain flexible about exact placement and disposition of the elements within your TR (bar placement, location of tables, etc.) until you’ve taken a look at available properties on the market.

Now you’re ready to go out and look for your space!

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Work with an agent in your area and describe your overall plan -- including estimated square footage range that you now know!

When looking at spaces for your brewery and TR, walk into the properties you're considering trying to see them through your ideal guests' eyes. What statement would locating your brewery in this neighborhood make about the business? Is it in a place where there's a natural market for your awesome beers, or are you going to have to drive business to your location? What does (or can, with some work) the landscaping and outdoor décor say? Is there adequate space for signage, and how are you going to make your brewery visible to passers-by or those on the hunt for it? Is there adequate car and bike parking for the traffic you are going to need to keep yourself in business and pay your bills (an opportunity here to check your math again to see what traffic you need)? Is there enough manufacturing, refrigeration, and storage space to service your TR (and your wholesale business, if that's part of your model)? Is there room to install a grain silo (or several) if one day you will be able to use that? Is there room for an addition to the building one day? Is there outdoor space where guests will be able to enjoy a beer?

Ask your local permitting/building department about change-of-use permits if the space you are pinpointing wasn't previously a brewery, and sift carefully through those permit applications to find potential unexpected costs (in both time and money) you'll need to cover in order to open.

With each space you consider, play several scenarios through your head – how best to place your seating so that traffic from the front door to seating, to and from the bar, and to and from the restrooms (and kitchen, if applicable) flows best. Do you need a greeter/host stand and waiting area and if so, where might that sit? Are you able to easily move walls or are you better off working within the current structure and flexing your initial design scheme to fit within the constraints of the space? And always, can the setting and flow somehow reflect your overall company values?

As you settle on a specific location, play around with where to place the various elements of your TR. If you're comfortable, use a 3D design app. If not, make a 2D paper model of the space and cut out major fixtures to scale. Don't skimp on space for likely major traffic routes.

Once you start to place elements of your taproom in your overall design, some specific considerations are important. For your bar or serving area itself, how are you going to get cold beer to the taps? Are you serving off of tanks or kegs (or bottles and cans)? How long are your tap lines going to need to be [generally: shorter is better, both for cleaning/beer waste and keeping beer cold], and do you need additional glycol lines to keep your beer chilled? How are you going to push the beer and where are you going to

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safely locate your CO2 and N2 supply (canisters or Dewar tank(s) & piping, and mixer)? Do you need a CO2 alarm (advisable for your team’s safety if you have CO2 lines to a walk-in refrigerator, even if alarms are not yet required in your location)? Whether using under-bar refrigerators or remote refrigeration, try to ensure you have enough space to back up kegs, especially of what turn out to be your most popular brands. It’s a huge bummer during a busy shift to have to run to the keg cooler and roll out and replace a keg (which, if you’re not filtering your beer, has the double whammie of shaking up your nicely settled craft beer), rather than just shifting the keg coupler from one keg to the next.

**Planning Your Tap Room or Tasting Room: Our Experience Part 2** continues with additional items to consider in your design, staffing needs, and thoughts about planning ahead for future growth.



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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.*