



TOPIC: NEW BREWERY & EXPANSIONS

A HOME LIKE NO OTHER – HOMEWOOD BREWING COMPANY TAKES ITS COMMUNITY TO THE NEXT LEVEL

🕒 9 min read

A lot of breweries share their name with the town where they do business. But arguably few towns and their namesake breweries are more aptly named than Homewood, Illinois, and the soon-to-open Homewood Brewing Company.

Homewood, less than 30 miles from the Chicago loop, is in many ways a classic American small town, with a main street of solidly constructed brick buildings and adjacent side roads of comfortable houses. “It’s very homey, family-oriented, close knit... They have all sorts of events – holiday lights and farmer’s markets and things like that,” said Brian Wallace, one of the owners of the forthcoming brewery bearing the town’s name. Head brewer Cam Horn, a transplant to Homewood, described the village as “a place where you recognize the people walking down the street and say ‘Hi’ to your neighbors.”

Homewood was also the home of the late multi-platinum selling rapper Juice WRLD, known to friends and family – including Wallace, his brother – as Jarad Anthony Higgins. If you don't know Juice WRLD, his music has garnered billions of streams in his short career. Juice WRLD joins the Beatles and Drake as the only artists in history to simultaneously place at least five songs in the top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100.[1] Long after he had relocated to the west coast, a move befitting his celebrity status, Higgins returned frequently to Homewood, where he found his safe refuge from the bright lights of fame. In fact, Carmela Wallace, Brian and Jarad's mother, had moved the family to Homewood specifically so that Jarad could attend Homewood-Flossmoor High School. "The community was super-welcoming to us," Brian related. "Very family-friendly, just a good place to be."

Carmela Wallace is also a co-owner of Homewood Brewing Company. When she and Brian were looking for a project to memorialize their son and brother Jarad – as well as contribute to the revitalization of the town – that profound spirit of home quickly became the jumping-off point. And it took little time for them to decide they wanted to build a brewpub in Homewood. After all, not only are brewpubs in many ways the ultimate home-away-from-home for people from all walks of life, both Carmela and Brian were fans of craft beer. Brian is a long-time home brewer, and both he and Carmela loved visiting breweries around the country. "Carmela always used to visit family in California," Brian related. "She would go to Belching Beaver and send me pictures. I would be so jealous."

In many ways Carmela Wallace fits the mold of the classic visionary leader – one who knows what she wants, and sets the tone for those she leads but also recognizes that the best way to make a project successful is to bring in talented people and stay out of their way. (The Homewood Brewing website aptly summarizes her role as "Partner, Inspiration.") Brian describes his mother as the brains of the entire operation. "She gives us a lot of freedom, but she's very involved...[especially] in the look and atmosphere of the place. As far as what you feel, what you see when you walk in the door, that's all Carmela."

Brian ("Partner, All Things Beer") is most heavily involved in the day-to-day management of the project. It's clear that, as knowledgeable as he already is, he's eager to learn even more about all aspects of the business. Despite his experience as a home brewer, he took an online brewing course through the University of Vermont. He's also working closely with Homewood Brewing's third partner, chef Robert Lauderdale, to learn about the food service side of the business. And with his background as an IT manager, Brian's role includes managing all the technology aspects of the business, including the website, the internet, and the POS system.

From the beginning the plan was to cut no corners when it came to the building and its amenities. Mike Gerhart of First Key Consulting, who were brought into the project early on, said "It was very apparent that what Carmela and Brian were building was pretty complex and well thought-out. They have a vision to embrace advanced brewing technology and sustainability."

First and foremost is the 10-barrel system, which according to Gerhart "will have everything in there that larger breweries would have." That includes a 3-barrel pilot system.

Head brewer, Cam Horn, not surprisingly, is excited about that, not just for the opportunities it will afford to flex his creativity, but for the analytics the system will enable. "Anything we want to scale up, we'll be able to dial in and replicate impeccably from batch to batch."

While the brewing equipment will be visible through the large glass wall behind the bar, there are even more amenities on the customers' side of the wall. The design is very open, with a variety of materials, including metal, glass, tile, and wood. There will be an event space, and current plans call for eventually including areas for pinball and outdoor games. The exterior features green roofs and outdoor patios, and even sidewalks that will be kept snow-free in the winter months thanks to radiant heating.

If the decision to go for the best in terms of design and construction was an easy one, another set of decisions have required more of a balancing act, and these relate to the Homewood Brewing brand and its all-important "reason for being." While the project was conceived as a tribute to his brother, Brian points out that "[Finding the right balance is] honestly a struggle right now, because we're not making it the Juice WRLD brewery... It will be a gathering place for Jarad's fans. We'll have murals that are a tribute to him, little quotes and aspects of him that will be scattered throughout... But we're really trying to balance out how much is enough. How do you please the fans, but at the same time, for people who might not have been fans, just make it a cool brewery?"



BREWING CO.

The project wasn't that far along when the Wallace family realized they needed some outside help with various facets of the brewery development and construction process. That's when they hired First Key to provide guidance, build the brewhouse, and complement the team with additional hands-on management.

First Key was asked to hit the ground running, and they did. "When we were brought on, it was a massive shot gun start," according to Gerhart, First Key's Senior Advisor, Technical Services. First Key showed their ability to hit the ground running and streamline the process. "The team was saying 'it's all eyes on you, this building is going up and we haven't bought any brewing equipment'... so we got in there and put all hands on deck, got all the equipment specified and ordered. I think the brewing equipment beat the building by half a year or more."

"It's been fantastic," Brian said of his experience working with Gerhart and Tim Wolf, Senior Advisor, Engineering Services at First Key. "I gave them my vision from the beginning. I wanted state of the art... I wanted to make it easy for a brewer to come in and be able to produce great beer. They took that, they proposed different equipment, they brought in different vendors. Not only did they say 'Here's what you should do,' but this is why you should do it this way, and this is how it relates to your vision."

Tim Wolf credits much of the project's success to date to the trust Carmela, Brian, and Cam showed in them. "We would give our advice and a lot of times they would take it and run with it, and that's how we overcame challenges... We addressed things with facts and figures, took emotion out of it."

After many months of collaboration, Brian says of Gerhart and Wolf "I feel like we're kind of BFFs at this point."

Much of what makes Homewood a quintessential American hometown is that the social fabric of the place is comfortably unchanging. Yet in one way there's a clear contrast between Homewood's recent past and the village's emerging future.

At one time Carmela, Brian, and Jarad used to enjoy visits to Bogart's steakhouse, which ultimately closed and was left abandoned as the downtown area suffered some hard times. Today, the former Bogart's site is in the fact the location for Homewood's brewery. In exchange for an agreement to build from the ground up, the village sold the land to the Homewood Brewing partners for a dollar.

Nothing could symbolize the village's on-going revitalization more so than this simple transition.

The brewery's opening is anticipated for late spring or early summer, 2024. What can early visitors expect in terms of the experience?

They can expect a big operation, with as many as 60 employees long-term. They can expect a facility that's state-of-the-art in terms of both brewing capability and customer service. They can expect an interior that's both "open, bright, and homey," with an undercurrent of artistic themes inspired by Jarad's life and work. They can expect a food menu that's carefully curated by chef Robert Lauderdale, featuring both beer pairings and prix fixe events. They can expect great beer flowing from up to 16 tap lines, from mainstream-adjacent lagers to more experimental offerings.

In short, according to Brian, they can expect "the coolest brewpub in the Chicago area."

But Homewood Brewing's role in the community doesn't stop when the lights are turned off at the end of each day and the building closes. Brian gets animated when he talks about that. "The whole community is all about the community, and we want to be able to fit into that – to be involved in the softball teams, and the high school, we want to find a way to bring the students in to learn from Robert in the kitchen area... There are tons of opportunities. For example, there's a cancer treatment group that reached out to us, they wanted to hold a private event at our place – of course we're going to do that."

The brewery will also have some collaborations with an associated non-profit, Live Free 999, founded and operated by the family.

Jarad Anthony Higgins would no doubt recognize the spirit of Homewood in his hometown's new brewery quite readily.

As of this writing, the planned opening of Homewood Brewing is still months away. "There's still so much to do, so many little things..." Brian commented. "I think it'll be tight, but we'll be pretty close."

"But I have opening night jitters right now."

[1] Chartdata.org (<https://chartdata.org/2020/12/31/juice-wrld-10-chart-highlights-from-2020/>)