

You're hired.

A CAREER IN BEER

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“Your beer is awesome. You should start a brewery!” Well-meaning people say this to their homebrewing friends. It’s a nice compliment, and some homebrewers are crazy enough to think about taking their hobby to the next level. They dream of starting their own brewery or going to work for Dogfish Head or Stone. But when the buzz wears off, the reality of what it takes to break into the beer industry becomes clear: it takes more than passion to build a career in beer.



Imperial Stouts are perhaps the most highly sought after style.

Go Pro or Go Home(brew)

Most professional brewers start as homebrewers, but there are plenty of jobs for people who aren’t interested in the actual brewing. These include packaging, quality control and lab work, restaurant and bar staff, marketing, finance, design, and many others. For the sake of this article, though, we will mostly focus on becoming a brewer.

Perhaps the grandest dream that homebrewer can have is to start their own brewery. The branding, the ambience, the recipes and the beers, the romance of standing over the kettle and, eventually, pouring your very own beer for your patrons; what could be better? It’s an admirable goal that will take time, money, and effort to achieve.

When considering starting a brewery from scratch, you have to think about what type of brewery to open. A Brewpub, according to the Brewer’s Association, sells no more than 25% of its beer for offsite consumption. Most of the beer is consumed onsite, with a small amount sold “to go.” If you plan to sell less than 25% of your beer onsite (most of it in kegs,



You will need a lot of hops if you want to be a craft brewer.

bottles, and/or cans for offsite use), then you become a Microbrewery. A Microbrewery sells less than 15,000 barrels per year and can make use of distribution networks as well as selling some beer onsite.

Brewpubs and Microbreweries require a large capital investment, but what about a Nanobrewery? This term has been bandied about frequently in recent years. A Nanobrewery is usually defined by the size of its brew system, not its annual volume. An unofficial definition says that a Nanobrewery uses a system that is 3 barrels or less. A small brewing setup such as this gives a brewery a more affordable, yet fully licensed, method of entering the market, testing the waters, and deciding whether they wish to grow. It is, perhaps, the most logical and easiest next step for a homebrewer who wants to “go pro.” Lower startup costs, more freedom to experiment with recipes, and an intimate relationship with its customers are all attractive characteristics.

Similar to a Nanobrewery is what’s referred to as a Farm, Farmhouse, or Farmstead brewery. There is something romantic about this type of setup, as historically many farmers have brewed their own beer for personal consumption. A Farmhouse brewery might be located in

a rural setting, use its own well water, and grow some of their own ingredients such as hops, barley, wheat, rye, corn, rice, oats, potatoes, honey, maple syrup, herbs, or fruits. They can sell directly to consumers and might also sell some natural-type food items. Farmhouse breweries might use organic ingredients, make use of wind or solar power, and cultivate a natural persona. An enterprising homebrewer might consider going this pastoral route and foregoing the city.

There are alternatives to acquiring your own brick and mortar structure and setting up shop. Agreeing to have your beer brewed by a Contract brewery eliminates the need to own your equipment because you either rent time in an existing brewery or have them brew your recipes for you. On the positive side, this may be a lower-cost option, but the flip side is that you’ll likely have to give up the ability to closely supervise every step; the way the equipment is cleaned might not be up to you; and your sense of ownership and pride might be lower than with other options.

Related to Contract breweries are breweries that share space. The ownership and cost can be shared in an “alternating proprietorship,” which is a special kind of federal license. Lucid Brewing and



Three Floyds Brew Pub in Munster Indiana.



You should start by brewing great beer at home.

Does drinking beer count as working? For some.

Badger Hill Brewing in Minneapolis, MN, have such an arrangement. Two startup breweries can work together and do things that would be more difficult on their own. A new brewery might not need to brew every day or have their entire space filled with their own fermenters. They may have space to share, and partnering with another startup brewery makes sense. The breweries keep their own records and keep their brewing ingredients separate, but they share the brewing equipment and space. This agreement requires trust and cooperation, but willing breweries can create a workable arrangement.



Mash tun at Summit Brewing.

Make good beer before you decide to jump in.



Summit Brewing is a fairly large regional brewery in St. Paul Minnesota.

If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em

You could start your own brewery, with all of its benefits and risks, or you could be hired by an existing brewery. This might mean less creative freedom but also less financial risk and fewer hours. What does it take to land a brewing job? A look at job postings on <http://www.probrewer.com/> is enlightening. At the high end, an applicant needs to be "proficient in all areas of running a microbrewery" and have "a minimum of 5 years' experience." Also: "Preference is given to formal brewing education" and a stated requirement is "safe chemical handling knowledge." We would be remiss to omit mention of this charming requirement: "enjoyment of physical labor."

EDUMACATE YOURSELF

It is not easy to waltz into a prestigious brewing job, and logging years of experience is its own challenge, but one thing you can control is education. The brewing industry is competitive, and breweries need their beer to be clean and defect-free. Proper brewing education can help a homebrewer expand his knowledge and know

what is required to brew effectively on a commercial scale. Brewing is partly art and also partly science, and meticulous attention to detail is imperative.

There are many education options, and future brewers need to decide how much time, effort, and money they are willing to invest. What are the goals? Is an online or community college class that lasts a few weeks sufficient? Or is moving to Chicago, California, Canada, Germany, or Australia for a program that lasts multiple years and costs thousands of dollars an option?

When thinking about a brewing education, plan ahead. Some schools' programs are booked for the next year or two, and financing needs to be secured. Pre-requisite classes might be required before beginning a program. Also, some programs focus more on science while others concentrate on the practical requirements of physically running a brewery.

We won't cover every possible option here, but two heavyweight U.S. programs deserve mention: the Siebel Institute of Technology in



Chicago and the University of California at Davis in Davis, CA. You often hear brewers say they went to "Siebel" or "UC Davis." These are considered top degrees as far as brewing education goes. The programs these schools offer are worth consideration by anyone who is serious about pursuing a job in brewing.



In Through the Back Door

You can start your own brewery, or you can work toward a brewing education degree, but there are also other options that require less time and financial investment. It is no surprise to learn that just as breweries are different, so are the requirements to work there. Some breweries might have entry-level jobs that require little more than the ability to lift 50-pound sacks of grain and a positive attitude. Or they might entail, as one ad said, “lots of bottle labeling, keg cleaning, taking out the trash, sweeping, mopping, etc.”

Looking at job postings is a good way to see what is out there. You might be surprised and even might be able to “sneak” into one. This is exactly what Jerry White of Duluth, MN, was able to do with a local brewpub. *Beer Magazine* spoke with White to learn how he got a job in the brewing industry.

White had left his previous job and was thinking about his next move. He was not



Jerry White of Thirsty Pagan Brewing in Superior, Wisconsin.

PHOTO: CALEB WHITE

getting any younger, and his wife thought he should “follow his passions.” He homebrewed for seven years before deciding to try and turn his hobby into a career. A lengthy, expensive brewing education was



Starting on the bottling or kegging line might be your way in.

not an option, but he did take a three-week online course from Siebel. White feels that this is a good, low-cost way for people to see whether a brewing education feels right for them.

Sometimes, you just have to get a little bit lucky and be, as White claims, “... in the right place at the right time.” A new, small brewery posted an invitation to come and watch them brew. Not only was this a way to meet people in the local brewing industry, but it also gave him a chance to see if a brewing job looked like something he would really want. He watched a few brew days there but was not allowed to help or get his hands dirty.

Later, a local brewpub had an opening in their kitchen. While he was applying, he mentioned that he would love to work in the brewery someday. This led to a discussion with the head brewer and before he knew it, White was volunteering in the brewery eight to 10 hours a week.

After a few months, White was able to brew a batch of beer by himself on the brewpub’s system. He had received free

on-the-job training as a volunteer. He was getting paid to work in the kitchen and volunteering in the brewery until a position in the brewery opened up. And so, with a three-week Siebel course and hours of unpaid brewery volunteer work, he snuck into the brewing industry and began to get paid to brew beer.

I asked him what, if anything, he would have done differently, or if he had words of advice. He said if he was younger, he might consider a more serious brewing education program. For anyone else thinking about getting into the brewing industry, he said, they should realize that “a passion for homebrewing does not always translate in a commercial or larger brewery setting.” That is, “It becomes a job, and it is work.” This does not mean a commercial brewing job isn’t for you, but it is something to think about. Being able to spend some time in a commercial brewery on several brew days is a great way to see what it is like firsthand.

LAST CALL

The number of new breweries continues to grow at an almost alarming pace. This means people are realizing their dreams of working in the brewing industry. Opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship are numerous. But anyone considering making a move would do well to recall the words of Jamil Zainasheff, repeat national homebrew award winner and, more recently, founder of Heretic Brewing Co. in Pittsburg, CA. Zainasheff says the question is not “Do you love craft beer?” but, “Do you love the craft beer industry?” Make no mistake; a job in the industry can be rewarding, challenging, and fulfilling. But you will have to be ready to work for your beer. ☛



There is always a back door reference isn't there?