Delta Sources and Resources



Native Brew Works viewed from across Gee Street.
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasmay.

More Than a Brewery:
Native Brew Works
515 South Gee Street
Jonesboro, Arkansas

by Shobhithan Kandasamy

Tucked away on the edge of the West End Neighborhood on Gee Street in Jonesboro sits Native Brew Works, a craft brewery and taproom that has quickly become a community anchor since opening its doors in 2021. Co-founded by childhood friends Jackson Spencer, Dustin Hun- dley, Dustin’s wife Ellen Hundley, and Heath Gammill, Native Brew Works exemplifies how pairing the entrepreneurial spirit with thoughtful placemaking and a commitment to bringing people together

can enrich and uplift a local community.

History and Adaptive Reuse of the Building

The Native Brew Works taproom and brew- ery inhabits a storied building that exemplifies the ethos of adaptive reuse and urban renewal. The crisp renovated exterior of the mid-century modern building, with its bright neon “Native” sign, large windows, teal flowerbeds, and wavy bike stands, contrasts with the neighboring time- worn commercial buildings. As co-founder Jack- son Spencer chronicles, “It’s really the original building constructed back in the forties as an al- ternator repair shop. In the late fifties and early sixties, they built across the front and down the side, had a flat roof with the big windows up front and then the awning that sticks out hori- zontally in that mid-century modern style. They

opened it as Brannon Automotive Parts.” The founders creatively repurposed the inte- rior by maintaining the industrial identity of the building through the exposed ductwork stretch- ing across the ceiling and lit by natural light through the large windows. Jackson continues re- counting the building’s many lives over the dec- ades: “That big brick wall inside was originally the service counter for the auto shop. Over the years it’s changed a lot—it’s been a used car lot, Benjamin Moore paint store, and most recently, a women’s resale boutique before we took it over. Before we moved in, half of it was being used by a construction company for tool storage.” Rather than tearing the building down, Native Brew Works embraced its identity and layers of history. By restoring the iconic mid-century facade, repur- posing the interior layout that was once a sales counter, and bringing color into the space through horizontal stripes derived from their logo on a painted white brick wall alongside one side of the building, Native Brew Works breathed new life into the building.

The Origins

The seeds for Native Brew Works were first planted back in 2011 when Ellen Hundley signed up herself and her husband Dustin, along with their friend Jackson, for a homebrewing class at the local supply store. As Ellen recalls, “I signed us up for a homebrew class at the local home brewer supply store. It was just something to do.” Little did they know at the time that this hobby would eventually blossom into a full-fledged busi- ness. As Jackson Spencer explains, “We started homebrewing and got really into it. We thought we’re gonna open a brewery back then in our basement, as everyone who starts home brewing does.” While their plans to open their own brewery straight out of homebrewing class didn’t pan out, the passion for brewing only grew stronger over the ensuing years, according to Jackson: “Things didn’t really work out then to start the brewery. We moved on with our lives; Dustin kept brew- ing.” Dustin’s dedication to the craft paid off with recognition at competitions, as Jackson notes: “Dustin actually won quite a few awards



Interior of Native Brew Works showing the sales counter (left) and repurposed service counter (right).
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasmay.

through homebrew competitions and state fairs, even got some blue ribbons.” The early seeds of Native Brew Works lay dormant for years before unexpectedly sprouting, thanks to fate and coincidence. As Jackson tells it, “In 2019 I moved back to Jonesboro and found out about a permit that allowed breweries to open in dry counties. I immediately texted Dustin, who was living in Memphis then, and said I’m moving back to Jonesboro to open a brewery. He initially said no way. But four days later he texted me asking what equipment we need and how much it’ll cost. I like to say it was four days sitting in a cubicle that made Dustin change his mind.” Jackson wouldn’t have even known about the permit if not for Dustin’s legendary home- brew making an impression years prior. As Jack- son reveals, “The way I found out about the permit is a funny story. Back in 2015, I was doing a presentation and Dustin brewed some beer. Two of our friends tried his coffee beer and loved it so much. Four years later I ran into them, and they asked if Dustin still brewed because they still talked about that coffee beer. Then they told me about the permit allowing a brewery in dry counties. If it wasn’t for Dustin’s amazing coffee beer all those years ago, I may have never learned we could open Native Brew Works here.”
Choosing the Location In searching for the perfect location to house their brewery dreams, the Native Brew Works team explored options beyond Jonesboro but ul- timately decided it was the right fit. According to Jackson Spencer, “Honestly, we looked at differ- ent areas, but we needed ample space inside for the brewery, kitchen, and taproom, outdoor space, and affordable rent. We found all that here, but also this is our neighborhood.” Being able to claim Jonesboro as their local community and contribute to its growth and character added meaning to the project. As Jackson shares, “I live three and a half blocks away, Ellen and Dustin live a few blocks away. It was a cherry on top that we could help start revitalizing this area.” Jonesboro’s history as their lifelong home- town made it all the more poetic to establish Native Brew Works’ roots here. As Jackson re- lates, “All three of us were born and raised in Jo- nesboro, kindergarten through college. Jonesboro needed something that was part of the identity and culture, something people would be proud of and excited to share with visitors.” In helping spur activity and community in the slower Gee Street corridor, Native Brew Works has become the catalyst for urban renewal for West Jonesboro and is writing the next chapter for an area filled with history.

Community with a Side of Brew In conceptualizing their brewery’s brand and aesthetics, the Native Brew Works team drew in- spiration from their connection to their home- town Jonesboro. As Jackson Spencer explains, “It took a while to come up with the name Native Brew Works. We were walking down to the river in Memphis and landed on it. Native means to be of a place, and we’re all native to Jonesboro.” By embedding their hometown into the brew- ery’s name and DNA, they forged an identity rooted in a sense of place from the very begin- ning. While crafting great beer is central to their mission, fostering community and connected- ness represents the true ethos of Native Brew Works. As co-owner Ellen Hundley shares, “Through the events we do and how we’ve de- signed the space, we’ve come to see regulars who come in two, three, four times a week. We’ve seen people who started as customers have babies. It’s cool to see it all come full circle.” Co- founder Jackson Spencer echoes how their cus- tomers have become extended family. By prioritizing people and relationships over trans- actions, Native Brew Works has organically cul-

tivated a community epicenter. The thoughtful layout of the taproom speaks to Native Brew Works' core purpose of bringing people together. The building consists of a bar and beer taps alongside the wall that leads to the brewery behind a glass wall. The seating area con-



Interior of Native Brew Works showing semi-private seating booths.
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasmay.

tains tables and chairs for dining, the brick sales counter repurposed as a bar, and booths that offer privacy that face the street. There is a space that can be repurposed for private events, and an outdoor seating area with lawn chairs lit by string lights, typically used by groups with children and pets. As Ellen describes, “The seating is intended so you come in, order at the bar, then find a place you may end up interacting with other groups throughout your time here. It’s about using the space in a communal way.” Jackson elaborates on the varied environments their de- liberate design facilitates: “You’ll notice a lack of TVs. We do have projectors for events but want to encourage community and conversation. There are intimate seating areas, the bar to en- gage with bartenders, and communal tables in- side and out. We wanted people to experience the space differently through the night.” By nurturing human relationships beyond merely serving quality beer, Native Brew Works has become a second home for many. As Jackson shares, “We wanted to anchor this area and see regulars two, three nights a week. We’ve really seen that and feel their support and friendship.” Simply by fostering communal spaces and experi- ences authentically, this down-to-earth brewery has made an indelible impact. Dry county laws prevent Native Brew Works from advertising alcoholic beverages, including its primary product, its beer. The brewery’s social media presence and website, constrained by dry county laws that prohibit mentions of alcohol, are filled with invitations to community events. From regular themed trivia nights to live music nights by local artists, and holiday markets, locals are drawn to Native Brew works for its commu- nity, with its popular brews such as Buzz Light Beer, Kolsch Encounter, Rye of the Tiger, Uno Mas, and

Bad Tattoos playing a complementary role to the experience at the brewery. In addition to their thoughtfully designed taproom, Native Brew Works makes community and camaraderie come alive through events cu- rated to bring people together, some of which are hosted in partnership with local organizations. As Ellen Hundley details, “The events we care- fully choose to do, we try to partner with others

in the community. We've done a barbecue pig roast with a local barbecue restaurant and a Friendsgiving meal with other restaurants that are meant to be communal dining where strangers become friends." Ellen adds that a weekly running club hosted by Native was started by Lindsay Spencer, co-owner of the nearby Story Coffeeshop and Jackson's wife, which built a great community. Many who didn't know each other before now consider each other friends. It's become an important part of their week, which is neat to see." Native Brew Works not only fosters community through their space and programming but also outwardly through partnerships amplifying other area organizations. As Ellen Hundley ex- plains, their events often incorporate charity partners like the local food bank. She expounds, "We are of this community, so we want to support people who are also doing good for it." One way Native Brew Works tangibly sup- ports women in their industry is through an an- nual specialty beer release. As co-owner Dustin Hundley shares, "Every March, for Women's His- tory Month, we brew Hazy Woman IPA using a special Pink Boots hop blend from the Pink Boots Society, which supports women in beer through scholarships and education." Buying those designated hops and brewing Hazy Woman, a brew bursting with citrus and herbal aromatics, provides concrete funding for the Pink Boots Society's mission while elevating women in the beer world. Native Brew Works makes a point to collabo- rate with other community members whenever possible. A great example is their work with Jamie Couch of Soul Shine Studios yoga studio on a cancer fundraiser. Jamie was participating in the "Real Men Wear Pink" campaign to honor his mother and raise money for the American Cancer Society. Native Brew Works hosted a do- nation-based yoga event with all proceeds going to his campaign. They also brewed a special pink seltzer to help promote his cause and donated a dollar from every beer sold that day. This type of creative co-working with other local business owners like Jamie exemplifies Native Brew Works' commitment to supporting Jonesboro's broader community. These collaborations spot- light shared passions while cross-promoting fel- low small businesses. Native Brew Works also partners creatively with neighboring businesses to strengthen the fabric of the community along Gee Street. Jack- son Spencer tells of a recent collaboration with a bookstore just down the block, saying those col- laborations are fun and help continue revitalizing the area. By proactively finding ways to cross-pro- mote and support other nearby small businesses, Native Brew Works contributes to the health of its whole ecosystem.

Looking Ahead

As a business less than two years young, Native Brew Works' story is just beginning. The owners remain heavily invested in seeing both their brewery and the surrounding area continue thriving into the future. While hopeful that laws eventually change to allow alcohol sales county- wide, for now, they are proud to operate under the existing specialty permits. Their sights stay fixed on strengthening their role as a community anchor and destination and hope for investments from the city to upgrade infrastructure in the area. By embracing the historic building, honor- ing the heritage of place, and fostering an inclu- sive space for connection, Native Brew Works has become an integral thread in the cultural fabric of Jonesboro. Their commitment to uplifting the community and partners around them continues writing the story of how a homegrown passion project can evolve into so much more. Only a few chapters along, Native Brew Works has already

demonstrated the power of investing in people, creating communal spaces, and building shared experiences to bring out the best in a community.

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