



# PIECE & LOVE

PIECE BREWERY & PIZZERIA WINS  
THE HEARTS OF PIZZA FANATICS



BY MANDY DETWILER PHOTOS BY RICK DAUGHERTY

“The love I feel can only be surpassed by the pizza I ate.” Those are the words etched in blue ballpoint pen in a bathroom at Piece Brewery & Pizzeria. If the restaurant’s sales — \$6 million-plus in 2010 — are any indication, it’s the sentiment of more than just one graffiti artist. Piece, it seems, has won the hearts of its entire city, an amazing feat for a New Haven-style pizzeria in a town built on deep-dish. Piece and its owners are smart, savvy and successful — a winning trifecta that has earned it Pizza Today’s 2011 Independent Pizzeria of the Year designation.

**“You should have told me you were going to Piece pizzeria,” said our cab driver as we pulled up to the restaurant, which opened in 2001.**

“It’s very famous in Chicago. Everybody goes there.” Located in Wicker Park, the restaurant was built out of a garage that housed trucks, affording it a high ceiling but a dirt floor and raw walls before construction. “I targeted this market because it was a growing entertainment district,” Owner Bill Jacobs says. “It was hip, it was trendy, and since 2000, when I signed that lease, it has just grown by leaps and bounds. It is one of the great entertainment centers of the city.

“When I was doing my market research, there was no brew pub and no pizza place in this market, which was a sizable, substantial market even in 2000.”

A decade later, the company has seen steady, impressive annual sales growth. Sales were up five percent last year but are already up nine percent in the first

half of 2011. Jacobs attributes much of that to Piece Out, a 1,000-square-foot ancillary takeout and delivery store that opened in 2007 in a former boutique next door. “We never had the capacity to do delivery,” Jacobs says. “We would do takeout, of course, but it would create a bottleneck at the front.”

Jacobs was confident it would succeed when he opened Piece Out four years ago, and last year, delivery and carryout accounted for \$1.6 million in sales. Drivers use their own insurance and their own car and undergo a training program, so that limits liability. His top concern: delivering a quality product. Jacobs even takes pizzas home and has them delivered to his house to ensure consistency and quality. “It starts with being a great product,” he says. “When it’s delivered, it’s a very good product.” (During *Pizza Today*’s visit, a customer picking up a pizza at the takeout counter was quick to interject his admiration for the company. “This is the best pizza in the neighborhood. We never have a piece left!”)

**Part of that appeal is that it offers a New Haven-style pizza, an homage to Jacobs’ youth.** “Our dad told us when we were very little (that) the best pizza in the world was Sally’s on Wooster Street, so we grew up on it. ... We knew the pizza was the best and we hadn’t experienced much outside of New Haven. ... Having lived in Chicago since 1983, I was never able to find a great thin-crust pizza. It was obviously known for its deep-dish pizza.”

Jacobs’ initial business plan, forged as he was winding down a thriving



**BILL JACOBS**  
Owner, Piece Brewery & Pizzeria



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bagel company he later sold to Big Apple Bagels, included a brewery concept from the start. Jacobs credits his friend, brewmaster Matt Brynildson, who worked for Goose Island Beer Company, for the addition of beer to his concept, a move “that was a critical component to our success.” (See the sidebar on page 63 for more on the company’s brewery.) That well-developed business plan included a logo, marketing plans, menu development and a location — all of which allowed Jacobs to raise more than \$1.1 million from investors (including guitarist Rick Nielsen of rock band Cheap Trick) during a time when technology was a less risky venture than restaurants.

The multi-level restaurant seats 245 people — 22 of those at the bar that nearly spans the length of one wall. “The Pit,” a sunken area commonly used for private parties, seats *(continued on page 60)*



40 and is often booked months in advance. The Chicago neighborhood, no longer as edgy as it once was, also draws a mixed demographics of young people as well as families. “It was obvious that this was a very good market,” Jacobs says. “There’re lots of businesses. It’s a great shopping area.”

There are a couple of competing pizza places nearby, but “we’re secure in what we do and we know we do a great job,” Jacobs says, adding that he welcomes the addition of businesses to the area, which he says “bolsters the market.”

The company employs about 125 people, and “we have very little turnover,” Jacobs adds, crediting that to a good working environment — one in which employees make money and are promoted from within. “My managers are all on bonus plans, and I’m happy to say that they always make their bonuses and they always do very well. We’re always looking at challenges and goals and meeting them head-on.” There’s an operational meeting held every Monday, where we’ll review our numbers. We’ll look at our food costs. We’ll talk about marketing. We’re pretty religious about it.”

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**Jacobs attributes much of the company’s success to that operational vigilance and its focus on quality, right down to grinding its own cheese (more than 2,400 pounds a week), making dough and frying bacon.** “We do everything. We make our own salsa. We make our own guacamole,” Jacobs says. Why not outsource? “We’re able to control the quality of it and get a good food cost out of it,” he adds.

Like most pizzerias in Chicago, sausage is Piece’s top seller. “It’s so focused on pizza. We’re not trying to do everything. We’re trying to be a great pizzeria and brewery first,” Jacobs emphasizes. “They



go hand-in-hand, pizza and beer.”

Dinner is the restaurant’s busiest day part, “with the exception of weekends and holidays, when we’re jam-packed. ... We do a big sports business.”

Sixty percent of the company’s sales comes from food, with beer accounting for 32 percent. Liquor and merchandise — including carryout growlers, t-shirts, hoodies and hats — makes up eight percent of sales.

“Branding has always been a big part of Piece, and we keep the tone of what we do consistent,” Jacobs says. “There’s a smart humor to it. It’s never in your face — it makes you think, and we do it in different applications” including at the point-of-purchase, table signs, merchandising, on the company’s Web site and in social media like Facebook and Twitter. (Jacobs will co-host a branding workshop at International Pizza Expo in March, 2012). The focus on branding is “smart in its simplicity,” and Jacobs gets help from a friend who is a local advertising agent who has helped Piece create an identity not just on the Chicago food scene but as a business in general. They do very little print outside of some alternative print publications, and even that is waning in favor of social media and store-level marketing.

**Although food costs have fluctuated in the past 10 years and the country’s economy soured, Jacobs says Piece has honed its operations, and that has encouraged its yearly sales increases.** “We’re clearly in a segment of the restaurant business that is affordable and we’ve continued to thrive, fortunately. ... We’ve become very good operators ... and I always say that we never remain content with what we’re doing. We’re always pushing the envelope and working to be a better operation. We know we’re good, but we know that

they’re always room for improvement. We don’t rest on our laurels. We’re not arrogant about how we’ve done. ... We’re always looking to be better.”

Does that include growth beyond a one-store operation? Jacobs has been approached to sell and to franchise, but has always declined. After all, there are challenges to opening a second unit. “There’s clearly a reason why I haven’t jumped at these opportunities,” he says. “Our sales are up and we’re doing well because we’ve stayed focused. It’s not about how much money you make. It’s about doing something that is satisfying.”

Instead, Piece focuses its efforts on quality and community. Jacobs rarely turns down an offer for help, either financially or through donations — including pet charities, local film festivals, public radio and schools.

“An important part our image is to give back,” Jacobs says. “It’s what we do to operate in good conscience.” ♦



**PizzaToday.com >> Video Spot**

**2011 INDEPENDENT PIZZERIA OF THE YEAR:** *Pizza Today’s* managing editor, Mandy Detwiler interviews Bill Jacobs, owner of Piece Brewery & Pizzeria.

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# SOMETHING'S BREWING

Part of Piece's success stems from its brewery operation and bar. Brewmaster Jonathan Cutler has been with the company since its inception and has earned dozens of national awards for his craft. Every square inch of storage that isn't taken up by product is crammed with bags of wheat and barley, tanks, barrels, tubes and hoses. The restaurant's takeout and delivery store, Piece Out, afforded it extra space for fermenting, which can take up to two weeks depending on the brew. In all, the brewery takes up 800 square feet. "We make use of every square inch," says Owner Bill Jacobs.

Adds Cutler: "This is the incredible shrinking brewery. It keeps getting smaller." In fact, pipes cross over the front beams of the restaurant into the new fermentation area of Piece Out.

"We have seven of our beers on tap," says Jacobs says. "We also have 10 guest taps. We feature other beers as well, but the vast majority that we sell is obviously ours."

The restaurant serves an average of 9,000 pints per week, and beer accounts for a whopping 32 percent of sales. "We did a little over 1,700 barrels last year. We'll do over 1,800 this year," Cutler says. "Initially, when the brewery was put in, it was designed to make about 500 barrels a year."

Piece has received accolades at the prestigious Great American Beer Festival and World Beer Cup. Says Jacobs: "Jonathan is one of the best brewers in the country."

Piece advertises its latest offerings in house and on social media sites. The Golden Arm, a classic Kölsch beer, is its top seller, followed by the Dysfunktionale, an American-style strong pale ale. Growlers, priced at \$16 (or \$12 for a refill) are so popular with carryout that Piece can sell up to 220 a week. Cutler

menus one or two new beers a week, but don't offer flights — popular in both beer and wine — because the bartenders can't keep up with the pouring.

"One of our initial challenges when we first opened for the first couple of years was to communicate that we were a brew pub, too. It's been part of the evolution," Jacobs says. "Our sales and our growth have been gradual. ... People's understanding of craft beers has grown substantially."

Jacobs compares the public's interest in craft beers to that of wine enthusiasts. A smarter, more educated beer consumer only helps increase awareness of Piece's brewpub offerings. IPAs sell better now than in the



*Brewmaster Jonathan Cutler*

past, and Piece started brewing the more recognizable varieties before branching out into more complex beer offerings. "It's the natural progression of a beer maker," says general manager Bob Wagner, adding that Chicago has become a "beer town," with several breweries that call it home.

Does the pub aspect detract from the restaurant's ability to be family friendly? Says Jacobs: "It's the perfect concept for families because parents can come in and have a beer while their kids can have pizza. You'll see that in the late afternoons and early evenings." ♦

*Mandy Wolf Detwiler is managing editor of Pizza Today.*