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PORTRAIT OF NEW
WEST LAWRENCE



Justine Johns, general manager at Johnny's West

From East to West

by Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog

These restaurants have established a unique vibe and following for themselves on both sides of Lawrence.

It's a perpetual conversation among Douglas County residents: Is Lawrence a small town or a big city? Depends on who you ask. Many a chat goes something like, "Lawrence is big enough for 'x,' but small enough for 'y.'"

Here's something to add to those conversations: Lawrence is big enough to have two locations of the same local restaurant, if one of those locations is in West Lawrence. It's true for both Johnny's Tavern and Lawrence Beer Co., one a longtime stalwart, the other a relative newbie. Both have found success in West Lawrence in addition to their original locations in central Lawrence.

Johnny's West opened near Sixth and Wakarusa in 2009, and Lawrence Beer Co. (LBC) West opened at Bob Billings and Wakarusa in 2019. Each of the West Lawrence outposts differentiates itself from the original, while also staying true to its core brand.

East vs. West

The expansion of Johnny's to West Lawrence came at a time when the owner of Johnny's original location in North Lawrence, Rick Renfro, and his partners were looking to take the Johnny's brand larger scale in Kansas City. Two Johnny's locations opened in Johnson County in the 1990s, but the expansions kicked into high gear and even crossed the Kansas-Missouri border in the late 2000s. In many ways, Johnny's West more closely resembles the Kansas City locations than the original tavern, but the West location still has its advantages.

"We're really lucky being in Lawrence and being near Johnny's North, because Johnny's North is its own entity and its own legend. It's got so much history that it's really cool to be here and see where it comes from," says Justine Johns, Johnny's West general manager since 2013.

Lawrence Beer Co. didn't wait so long between its founding and its expansion to the west. The original LBC opened in East Lawrence in 2017, with the goal of being a neighborhood gathering spot in the then-recently established Warehouse Arts District, where people could walk or bike over to meet friends, owner Matt Williams says. Originally, there was no intention to do any more than brew beer and share food with friends, eastside-style. But when the particular spot



Banquet Room on Trivia Night
Guest enjoying the pizza
The Johnny's Bar
Justine conversing with customers during lunch

opened up in the shopping center just south of Bob Billings, Williams saw it as a solution for a segment of his customers.

"What we found is that people's busy lives only allow them to venture closer to home to have time at the brewery, and LBC West would be closer to some people's homes," he says. "A lot of the hard part of opening a restaurant is gaining the trust of and endearing yourself to the community. We had already done that. We weren't some new, unproven restaurant."

Location, Location, Location

The particular spaces for each of these West Lawrence locations were as much of a factor in the decision as anything else for both restaurants. Johnny's West took over former local restaurant JB Stout's space. And it was in an existing shopping center that already had steady daily traffic. In 2017, Johnny's West expanded and took over the space to the north of the restaurant, where it added two party rooms that could accommodate 100-person parties—a capacity Johnny's North does not have.

For LBC, Williams says they liked the uniqueness of the West Lawrence space, in particular that it wasn't the type of "building that exists everywhere." With as much outdoor space as indoor space, they wanted to make it feel more like gathering with friends at their homes and in their backyards to have a beer and a sandwich, like residents in West Lawrence would do. Having a fireplace and Adirondack-style chairs in which to lounge adds to that atmosphere.

Both restaurants have found that they have cultivated a distinct clientele for their westside locations, with only occasional overlap to their original locations, proving the expansions cast a wider net of customers instead of dissecting their core customer base.





LAWRENCE BEER

Inside and outside dining at
The Lawrence Beer Company – West



Setting Themselves Apart

For Johnny's West, Johns says that hosting the University of Kansas Athletics "Hawk Talk" radio shows with the KU football coach and men's and women's basketball coaches has brought people to the restaurant and cemented it as a place to watch KU games in all seasons.

The TVs on the wall aren't the only attraction to Johnny's West. Because of its proximity to some other Lawrence and KU attractions, the restaurant draws different core groups of customers year-round. Youth sports tournaments at Rock Chalk Park can have a huge impact on business, Johns says, and often entire teams and their parents will show up for a meal between games or in the evenings after the competition. Having the expanded space accommodates those groups easily.

She explains that business used to drop off in the summer, but the tournaments have changed that entirely. And the Kansas Relays are huge for business in April. Theatre Lawrence productions bring folks in for dinner or a drink before or after the show, and various events at Lawrence Free State High School also drive business, especially graduation and home football games.

"We have a lot of new neighbors, which has expanded our business exponentially. New restaurants actually help us, because more people come our way," Johns says.

Williams says that LBC has been "lucky" that the west location has worked out even better than they thought. "What we found is that people who were at LBC East once a month now do LBC West about once a week," he says, likely because of the shorter drive time from their homes. The East Lawrence location tends to draw about half of its business from people in the neighborhood or a short radius away, and the other half of its business comes from out-of-towners who are in nearby



downtown for any number of reasons and stop by to eat or have a beer. LBC West is almost entirely nearby neighbors and regulars for lunch, happy hour and dinnertime.

With the different clientele, both Johnny's West and LBC West have food menus that diverge significantly from their original locations. Johnny's West has the same menu as the 10 other Johnny's Tavern locations in the Kansas City area, Johns says, which differs from the "hole-in-the-wall" feel of the menu at Johnny's North. LBC West has about half of the same menu items as LBC in East Lawrence, Williams says. "West Lawrence is more casual, more deli items, with a quicker in and out that people seem to want," he says. The LBC Burger is the best seller at both places, but the second- and third-most popular items at LBC West aren't on the East menu at all: the Reuben sandwich and the hot ham-and-cheese sandwich.

Working Together

An advantage to having two locations in a town the size of Lawrence is staffing. Of course, when it is the NCAA Championship game with every seat and table full, it doesn't help much; but the rest of the time, collaborations are possible.

Johns says Johnny's owner Renfro is at Johnny's West every day to check on the operation and staff. There are 15 partners who, combined, own all of the Johnny's, so having one of those partners just across town is helpful when issues and ideas arise.

"We're lucky that we're not corporate with people in offices. The people who own also manage and actively work in the restaurants," she adds.

Now that the Kansas City locations are well-established, Johns says Johnny's West sometimes gets staff members who already have worked in a Johnny's and are familiar with the menu and operations. It saves time on training, and the staff's understanding of the brand enhances the customers' experience.

Williams says LBC has some staff members who work at both the east and west locations. "It helps the continuity between the two places," he explains.

LBC has some grand ideas and plans to hold events in the near future that connect both locations, Williams adds. For one, the Lawrence Loop comes very close to each restaurant, so they are hoping to capitalize on that creatively.

Rumbling tummies and parched throats on all sides of Lawrence can rejoice in the choice and save gas by hitting the closest location of their favorite local restaurants. The town is indeed big enough for the two of them. ▲

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Exterior of Arterra – event gallery

An Opportunity Brings New Life to a Long Time Business

by Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog

Now you can hire the same company to cater and host your private event whether you want to be downtown or in West Lawrence.

A downtown caterer and event specialist has added a West Lawrence event space to its operations. Maceli's banquet hall and catering, 1031 New Hampshire St., recently acquired Arterra Event Gallery, 2161 Quail Creek Dr., and is hosting events at both venues.

Owner Steve Maceli says the Arterra purchase was finalized at the end of August, but Maceli's, in its 27th year in business, had been partnering with Arterra on events at the space since June 2021.

"Starting last year, we took over events that Arterra's previous owners had sold, and we fulfilled those

contracts. We knew very quickly that applying the Maceli's model at Arterra was going to be successful," he says.

The timing for the expansion also coincides with Steve Maceli's husband joining the catering and event operation. John Connolly retired from the University of Kansas in June after 38 years, most of those as graduate program coordinator for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Now, he will help oversee events at Arterra, where he had been helping out in the past year. Two of the couple's sisters-in-law also are coming on board, making the operation "even more of a big family business," he says.

The Arterra space held appeal for many reasons, Maceli explains. For one, the West Lawrence location is different than downtown and poten-

tially closer to home for some clients.

"It is smaller than our ballroom, so small events are nice there. There is an outdoor space, which we don't have downtown, and it has landscaping and a patio. A lot of brides get married outside at Arterra. It's a totally different vibe that is not at all what we already have," he says.

Arterra has a private parking lot, as well. The outdoor space is where Connolly first put his stamp. "He's the landscaper in the family," Maceli says. "The golf course by Arterra is now defunct because they redesigned the course. So we have been planting hedges and stuff in the green space right next to us to the west."

The full kitchen at Arterra can be employed for on-site events, though most of the catering inventory is de-



Stephen Maceli and John Connolly – co-owners of Arterra event gallery



A weekend wedding with indoor and outdoor space



livered and stored at the downtown Maceli's building. Having the additional kitchen to help supplement for very large events will be helpful, though, as Maceli learned this spring when Maceli's catered the National Championship basketball banquet in April at Allen Fieldhouse. That event required both kitchens, with the staff meeting in the middle at the Fieldhouse to serve.

Maceli sees the Arterra expansion as part of a new era for his business, particularly after improvising and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We were so tired trying to bring the business back last spring. But with Arterra, we were so giddy. How often do people in their 50s and 60s have the chance to reboot their lives? Arterra rebooted Maceli's," he says. ▲

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