

A Whole Foods will open a whole brewpub inside

Grocery chain's new store in Galleria area to make its own beer behind glass wall

By Ronnie Crocker

Whole Foods Market, which already offers shoppers places to dine in, sip gourmet coffee or otherwise hang out, is ready to sell them fresh-made beer as well when it opens its next Houston store in early November.

The specialty grocer has had so much success with in-store draft beer sales of other craft brands - pushing 17,000 pints across the bar each week at the 19 bars it runs in Whole Foods stores across its southwest region, including four in the Houston area - that it decided to open its own brewpub and make its own beer behind a glassed-in wall.

The pub will feature 20 beer taps, eight to 10 of which will be reserved for ales and lagers brewed on-site.

Management hopes people will imbibe at the 40-seat bar, carry glasses around while picking up bread and milk or fill up jugs of beer to go. The store also plans to host tastings, beer dinners and other special events on an indoor terrace upstairs or at a seating area out front.

The store opens Nov. 6 inside BLVD Place in the Galleria area.

Brewmaster Dave Ohmer, who was



The fermentation tanks for a brewpub have been installed as construction continues at a Whole Foods Market for BLVD Place in the Galleria area. The pub will have 20 beer taps.

hired in May after 12 years brewing commercially in Tennessee, said he intends to keep a variety of styles on tap and to incorporate produce and spices from around the store. He'll make use of in-house food experts and their equipment.

He might toast coconut chips or smoke malts to add new flavors to beer, for example, turn spent grain into treats for pets or bake bread with the pre-fermented, sugary liquid known as wort.

"We're going to take a lot of the beer out into the store," he said. "... Nothing is off the table for us to brew."

Ohmer said he is excited about making seasonally appropriate beers - a special Thanksgiving-themed brew will be among the first - and beers

that pair well with food that's also been prepared inside the store.

Paul Gatza, director of the Brewers Association, a trade group for the nation's 3,000-plus craft brewers, said he knows of brewpubs opening in homebrew supply shops and even in a hardware store. While this is the first full-fledged grocery opening he's heard of, he said it seems a natural outgrowth of in-store cafes.

Gatza said he thinks the brewpub will help existing brands on the shelves, rather than take sales from them.

'Doing a growler'

"The other beers they sell on-site would be packaged for off-premise enjoyment," he said in an email. "If

someone is doing a growler fill at Whole Foods, that would be competition to some degree, but odds are that once someone gets used to buying draught beer at grocery, they will likely buy other beer to take home, and then repeat that behavior with the same or other brands.”

Whole Foods opened its first in-store bar opened in Dallas in March 2010. The one inside BLVD Place will be the fifth in this area. Karma Clark, specialty coordinator for the four-state southwest region, said the chain has retrofitted all of its existing stores in places where those sales are allowed by law.

The success of those bars helped make a convincing case for the brewpub, Clark said. She called the brewpub, which will operate as a separate entity under the name Whole Foods Market Brewing Co., a “logical next step” for a concept that “revolutionized the grocery shopping experience.”

Whole Foods will eventually distribute its house-brand beer to other stores, potentially including competitors, through a wholesaler.

Ohmer said the brewery has capacity to make 400 to 500 barrels of beer annually, with room to expand by adding taller fermentation tanks. He expects to be at capacity within a year.

Chris White, treasurer of the Open The Taps advocacy group that lobbies for beer-friendly changes to state law, said he sees “no downside” for consumers to having more beer made closer to home. He credits Whole Foods’ in-store bars with making more people aware of growlers, the glass or aluminum jugs that people



Dave Ohmer, brewmaster for the Whole Foods Market Brewing Co., says he intends to keep a variety of styles on tap. He wants to brew beers that pair well with food that’s also been prepared inside the store.

pay to have filled, and he hopes other grocers will follow that lead.

“I see no reason growler fills shouldn’t be next to the lobster tank at Kroger,” White said.

Specific segment

But don’t expect in-store brewpubs to go mainstream anytime soon, grocery analyst David Livingston said. Whole Foods and H-E-B have successfully opened delis, coffee kiosks and other food-centric spots that appeal to a specific segment of the population, he said, but some other chains would have a tough time replicating their success.

“You’ve got to be good at the food service end of it to begin with,” Livingston said. “... If anybody else tried it, there would be a huge shrug, like, ‘Why?’ “

Whole Foods Market Brewing Co.

What: Specialty retailer is opening its first in-store brewpub

Where: Inside the new store in BLVD Place, 1700 Post Oak Blvd.

Hours: The pub will be open during regular store hours

Store opening: The BLVD Place store is expected to open Nov. 6.