



Freely Taproom's Paul Gillingwater persevered through the pandemic, product delivery issues to create the hive of South Tempe.

— Photo by Andrew Lwowski

Freely, still the buzzing place to bee

By Barbi Walker-Walsh



Barbi

Freely Taproom & Kitchen, nestled in the vibrant NW corner of McClintock and Warner, draws locals to its buzzing hub with a unique blend of great drinks, delectable food, and a strong sense of community.

The thriving restaurant has become the pride of the neighborhood and its owner, Paul Gillingwater.

"My original plan was to create a casual beer bar that served some food," Gillingwater said.

But Freely has grown into something much bigger, a restaurant sculpted by the voices of those it serves.

"I love to pose the questions, 'Why do you love Freely and what would you change about Freely?'" Gillingwater said.

"The responses can be very motivating."

Opening during a global pandemic brought numerous challenges, even for Gillingwater, who

has been in the restaurant business since he was a teen. Equipment delays and finding good help pushed the soft opening so far out that it eventually became moot, and they skipped a grand opening altogether.

Regardless, the restaurant found its home.

But it wasn't just the quality of food and beverages that saw Freely through tough times; it was the connections made with guests that helped drive its success. "This is exactly what we set out to do," Gillingwater said.

Freely's success is a testament to community-driven growth and the realization of Gillingwater's vision. Freely not only survived but thrived.

Becoming part of the neighborhood has been incredibly gratifying, Gillingwater said.

"I really feel like Freely has become the neighborhood gathering place." Although the growth and popularity of Freely make it harder for Gillingwater to interact with patrons as much as he'd like, he still finds time.

"I'll likely be cleaning up the dining room or

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bringing your food to your table when you see me," he said.

This is often how he meets neighbors and gets direct feedback from customers.

Now that a brunch menu and bottle shop are Freely staples, Gillingwater is looking ahead and hints at cooking up a few new menu items for the Freely crowd, like enhancing the brunch menu and expanding sandwich options.

"Stay tuned!" Gillingwater said.

Gillingwater praises the people behind the counter and in the kitchen for making Freely shine. "They take pride in their job, and it shows day in and day out."

Freely's ambiance is inspired by the Italian concept of a "third space," popularized by Howard Schultz, the founder of Starbucks.

This third space is neither home nor work but a welcoming place designed for gathering, conversation, and connection.

It's a space where you can feel "free to bee"

yourself without any prejudice or judgment.

The name Freely emerged from a fortunate naming conflict but eventually became the ethos of what Freely stands for. The original name, Fremont, couldn't be used due to a similar name held by a brewery. Fortunately, this issue was identified months before opening.

"Our logo, which includes a bee, was already in place, and 'Free to Bee' was a crucial part of our identity," Gillingwater said. "Thus, we chose 'Freely' as the name."

Unique as an adverb, he said, it signifies a place of comfort and community connection for him and his staff, embodying the essence of being free in time, place, and circumstances.

Arizona holds a special place in Gillingwater's heart and, as an ASU alum, it's a sentiment reflected in Freely's ambiance and decor.

Artist Bethany Jagielko created the murals inspired by the natural beauty of Arizona. The blooming saguaro cactus mural represents renewal

and growth and was inspired by the abundance of flowering saguaro cacti Gillingwater noticed during a hike in the spring of 2021.

When he saw the crowns of flowers buzzing with honey bees collecting pollen, he knew this vibrant image would be perfect for a mural.

The cityscape mural symbolizes the neighborhood where Freely is located, emphasizing the deep connection to the local community.

The bee also has come to represent Gillingwater. He spent many childhood summers with his aunt in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Just below her house was the Beehive State capitol, where a giant beehive with the inscription "Industry" is etched into the bronze.

Just like bees being industrious, Gillingwater embodies hard work and perseverance, always striving for a better life for himself and those in his hive.

This industrious spirit is at the heart of Freely.

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