

## No Space, No Problem: New York City's Dedicated Home Brewers

By [Courtney Iseman](#) | December 11, 2019

New York's home-brewing scene has given the city some of its best breweries—out of tiny apartments.



Some of the tools for home brewing at Bitters & Esters. Photo by the author.

Terry Di Paolo has welcomed 40 strangers into his home on Saturday afternoon. It's a bit of a squeeze, but the Brooklynite smiles as he talks about the beers he's made for everyone to try, including a hefeweizen and a Belgian tripel. His apartment is the first stop on the [Park Slope Homebrew Tour](#), which visits three homes for guests to try each home brewer's offerings.

Di Paolo is one of New York's many beer enthusiasts here who love making their own suds so much that they do so despite some of the city's unique challenges. Apartment rental site [RENTCafé ranked](#) the average square footage of apartments in 100 U.S. cities in November of 2018, and Manhattan was second only to Seattle at 733. Even in Brooklyn and Queens, we often don't have basements, sheds or spare rooms, and we're typically sharing our limited space with roommates or family.

"Space has a huge bearing on what equipment I use," Di Paolo says. He's allocated a kitchen closet shelf for his setup, and uses stackable brew pails. Talk to different home brewers and you'll hear different challenges, like strategizing how to brew with only one burner. Fermentation can be trickiest since it requires temperature control. Di Paolo now has a 1949 Frigidaire for fermenting his beer, but in the beginning, he had to get creative. "The first batches I brewed, I didn't have a way of [controlling the temperature], so I put the five-gallon bucket into my bathtub, which I filled with water and ice. It was rather hysterical, and not exactly ideal. The beer turned out okay, though!"

"If you go to the suburbs, people are brewing in their garage, or front porch," says Jason Sahler, a home brewer who went on to open [Strong Rope Brewery](#) in Gowanus. "Not a lot of people here have that, so you learn to do more with less." This can involve both creativity and sacrifice. "[New York homebrewers] will say, 'I need a refrigerator for serving or I need something for temperature control and I will sacrifice something for that,'" explains John LaPolla, who co-owns the city's only home-brew supply shop, [Bitter & Esters](#), with Douglas Amport. "I know someone who had a side table; that was their kegerator. They made it a table, and they also served beer out of it."

Along with creativity and sacrifice comes commitment and dedication. If you're going to MacGyver your apartment for a hobby, you want to be sure you'll love that hobby for a long time. "We have a hard time buying bulk laundry detergent and extra toilet paper at Costco and having a place to store it in New York City, so how do you fit in something that's not a function of your daily life in your apartment, i.e. home-brewing?" says [beer writer and author](#) Joshua M. Bernstein, who founded the Homebrew Tour a decade ago. "If you're doing it in New York City, you're not just doing it half-ass, you gotta commit to it."

For some, the equipment's very presence is motivation to keep brewing. Co-founder of the city's biggest home-brewing club, [Brewminaries](#), Sheri Jewhurst notes that the biggest space issue for her has been bottles—one batch of beer calls for 45 bottles. LaPolla agrees. "If it's bottle storage and it has beer in it, that's forgivable, but if it's bottle storage and there's not beer in it, then it's like is this worth it? So, you try to keep bottles full at all times."

The question is: *why?* Bernstein points out that ten years ago, there wasn't really a brewery scene in New York City. Law changes in 2009 made it easier for breweries to open taprooms, and now we have over 40 breweries. Before that change, home brewers *were* the craft beer scene in New York, but the scene has only evolved now that people have taprooms to visit. "Just because you can buy food at a restaurant doesn't mean you stop cooking," Bernstein says, citing home brewers' creativity and community as reasons why home-brewing is going strong. New York may present physical obstacles for brewing, but its way of life inspires people to come together and brew. "Let's face it, New York is a pretty hard city," Bernstein notes. "It can be hard to find your circle...I think that happens with home-brewing, it brings people together."

Two institutions have been instrumental in fostering this sense of community: Brewminaries and Bitter & Esters. The latter opened in 2011 to sell equipment and ingredients, offer brew-on-premises services for those who want to brew *without* navigating space issues at home, and to teach classes. Beyond the shop's extensive roster of classes at different levels, they've established themselves as a well of information. "We're always available for answering questions, so what we end up being is a safe haven," LaPolla says.

Bitter & Esters also hosts beer swaps and club meetings—New York City has eight home-brewing clubs. Jewhurst says Brewminaries formed from a group of home brewers meeting at Bitter & Esters regularly in 2013. They'd swap beer and discuss what they'd do differently. "Each and every one of us were having to experiment with one variable at a time...If we were all able to come together and brew those things as a group, we could test more things at once." Jewhurst says the club was founded on the principle of shared learning, but that "the best possible outcome and surprise was how the community of friends just started to grow and grow."

Brewminaries isn't just the city's biggest club, it's the most diverse, in gender, ethnicity, profession and age. In fact, it's diversity and inclusivity that both Jewhurst and LaPolla say is what makes New York City home brewers special, above their resourcefulness. Bitter & Esters recently won [Homebrew Shop of the Year](#) from the American Homebrewers Association, an award decided based on essays written in by members. "The thing that [voters] kept repeating was inclusivity of the home-brew scene and of Bitter & Esters," LaPolla says.

New York's home-brewing scene has given the city some of its best breweries. In addition to Sahler's Strong Rope, Chris Cuzme and Mary Izett opened [Fifth Hammer Brewing Co.](#) and Tony Bellis, Pete Lengyel and Zack Kinney established [Kings County Brewing Collective](#) (KCBC). Exemplifying the strong bond of the local brewing scene, these brewers don't leave their home-brewing friends behind. "Strong Rope still has ties to the home-brewing community, we sponsor events and give donations for awards to the competitions," Sahler says. So, while some may pick up a brew kit with professional ambitions in mind, more still are using kegerators as side tables and kitchen cabinets for bottle storage to flex some creative muscles and meet others from all walks of life who share one love: beer.



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