

John Sokol

Leesburg, Florida



Great Chicago Fire Brewery & Tap Room

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur John Sokol:

Before relocating to Lake County, John Sokol, owner of Great Chicago Fire Brewery and Tap Room, owned and operated two distinct businesses in the Chicagoland area. He ran a bar for 15 years and prior to that, he operated a limo service. Sokol and his wife had no intention of moving to Florida and starting a new business. However, as Sokol shared, sometimes life takes you to unexpected places and new opportunities present themselves.

"My journey pretty much started when I was 18 years old," Sokol said. "I started a DJ company. As the business grew, someone encouraged me to buy a limo to expand my services. I took their advice and, over time, we went from one to 16 limos. During that time I became President of the Illinois Limo Association and also won Small Operator of the year in 1999. After 10 years in business, we sold the company to Carey

International. At that point, I was semi-retired."

Sokol's "retirement" was short lived. While not completely outside his wheelhouse, he decided to buy a bar. Sokol built the business and, along the way, made many beneficial connections and friendships. One such connection led to an alternative career path that Sokol never saw coming.

"I met the local fire chief at my bar on New Year's Eve," he said. "After learning about my background with the limo service and my experience with writing grants, he asked if I could help the fire department with grant writing. I agreed to do it. I didn't think it could be that much different than what I did in the past. Anyway, one grant led to others, which led to learning about the equipment, which eventually led to me becoming a volunteer fire fighter."

After 15 years running his bar, and also working as a fire fighter, Sokol was ready to turn his attention to a new business. He was tired of competing on price with other bars. According to Sokol, as a result of this practice, profits were shrinking for everyone. He shifted gears and jumped on the craft beer craze that started blossoming around 2013.

"Breweries were becoming very popular in and around Chicago," he said. "Not wanting to over-extend ourselves, we decided to start a nano-brewery instead. We brewed much smaller amounts of beer than traditional breweries, which gave us a little niche."

In 2016, Sokol's son started school at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. After exploring Central Florida, Sokol and his wife decided to buy a piece of property to be closer to their son. They also got the idea

to relocate the brewery to Florida. After exploring Eustis, Mount Dora, Tavares and other towns in Central Florida, they decided on Leesburg. From a business standpoint and from a quality of life standpoint, they were very impressed with the area. In March 2016, they found the perfect location in downtown Leesburg to relocate the business. By August, they were open for business.

"We decided to take the same approach in Florida as we did in Illinois," Sokol said. "We only brew 15 gallons of the 10 beers we brew. At our size, we can't distribute, but because we brew such small batches, we're able to update our beer menu more often. The next step was deciding what food to offer. We saw a lot of BBQ, burgers and wing places. Born and raised in the Chicagoland area and knowing that a lot of mid-westerners move to Florida, we thought about what we didn't see. That's where the idea came from to offer Chicago style food like beef sandwiches, hot dogs and Italian sausages."

According to Sokol, some of the challenges with relocating the business included, learning the different brewing and licensing laws, having to develop relationships with Chicago style vendors, such as Vienna, in order to get the right products and introducing a new style of food to most Lake County residents. Nevertheless, through use of social media, advertising, word of mouth, Sokol's involvement as President of the Downtown Leesburg Business Association and through liaison positions on the boards of both the Leesburg Center for the Arts and the Leesburg Partnership, business has continued to increase.

Sokol shared his future goals and the story behind The Warehouse, his latest venture. "In terms of the brewery and tap room, we're happy with

the way things are," he said. "We can always use more customers, but so can everyone. We have a great team in place and things are good. The Warehouse is a way to support a non-profit I recently started called Military Fire Policy Support Association (MFPSA). It's basically a social club with food and drinks where the profits go towards supporting military veterans, police officers, fire fighters and other emergency support personnel. In addition to MFPSA, I also started a program in 2008 to train first responders on how to handle a call if there's an individual with autism. Since moving to Florida, we've partnered with Gator Harley Davidson to raise money for the autism community. Last year we raised over \$5,000 to give to different organizations throughout Lake and Sumter counties."

What advice does Sokol have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "Just knowing how to do something doesn't mean you can do it well enough to start a business," he said. "I've seen some of the best plumbers and electricians start a business and fail. Just because you're a master chef, it doesn't mean you can necessarily run a restaurant. Do your research, write a business plan, look closely at the market and don't assume that everyone will like your product. Also, you're only as good as the people around you. Your staff will make or break you. You need a staff that supports your vision and feels at home when they come to work. Customers will recognize that right away. They can see when employees like their jobs and when you're passionate about what you're doing. Service is huge. Customers will put up with mediocre food or products if there's great customer service. Lastly, the old saying about being a business owner and putting in 80 hours per week so you don't have to work 40 is very true."

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