

[audio from FBBC Family Reunion]

Douglas

testing 123123

Sadie

What's your name? And why are you here?

Douglas

My name is Douglas Witkowski. I'm here with my sister.

Sadie

But why are you... why are we here?

Douglas

For beer! Have a drink

I recorded this little snippet back in April, on a cloudy day out in the Hill Country of Texas

Sadie

So we are here at family business Brewing Company FBBC. Better known as Jensen's brewery.

It's actually 'Family Business Beer Company,' not brewing. And while I'd like to blame inebriation for the misspeak but it was still much too early in the night to make that excuse.

Sadie

It just opened we've got our first drink. We're sitting outside because it's loud as hell inside. Yes, it's overcast. high ceiling and clouds looks like it could rain but not imminently.

On that day in April, We had arrived promptly at 6pm for the member-only private event, better known as the 'Family Reunion.' Normally, an overcast day in central Texas means you can sit outside without frying in the sun. But even with a plethora of tables available outside, most of the attendees were packed into the red, barn like structure that serves as the brewery and taproom. Listening to live music, standing in line for a new pint, and generally milling around - hoping to catch a glimpse into the production space where most suspected to see a recognizable face.

Of course, not everyone was straining to sneak a peek at Jensen Ackles.

Gino Graul

we cater to a variety of different people. Of course, a lot of the locals have no idea about the affiliation with with with Jensen, or the show or anything along that line. And and we love that too.

Meet Gino.

Gino Graul

my name is Gino Graul. I'm the CEO of Family Business Brewery company.

While fandom folks might refer to the brewery as Jensen's project, that's not really the case.

Gino Graul

The name family business is kind of twofold. So originally, the founding members were Danneel and Jensen Ackles, my parents: Ed and Debbie Graul and then myself and so those were those were the original family members.

The brewery was Gino's conception, supported by his parents, his sister Danneel, and his brother-in-law Jensen.

Today, on In Defense of Fandom, I want to take a peek at what it's like to be on the other side of fandom. What's it like to have family go in with you on a venture like starting up a brewery? And how does having that famous brother-in-law affect business?

[music]

Perhaps we should start with how Family Business came to be.

Debbie Graul

you can see Austin from here and Danneel's uncle owns the land next door. He owns about 375 acres. And he's got the highest point in Travis County.

When I visited FBBC for the Family Reunion, I managed to snag a picnic table outside in their oak grove to have a chat with Debbie, Gino and Danneel's mother. Their parents made the trip from Louisiana to help get the brewery ready for the party. And yes, they

really were put to work! Mostly with hand labeling bottles of the barrel-aged Imperial Stout.

Debbie Graul

My husband and I labelled probably 600 bottles. I'd say yesterday. [Sadie cuts in] You're kidding hands were you doing in my hand? [Debbie] Yes. And so if they're really nice. I didn't if they're a little bit crooked, he did.

It was the connection to Debbie's family that led Gino to finding the location for the Brewery.

Gino Graul

Our uncle John actually owns some property out here in the hill country. And so I was giving him a hand we were clearing some land, cutting some, some trails on his property. And as he was leaving the site, he drives past his next door neighbor's house. And there's a realtor putting a sign out in the front yard that says coming to market soon.

Gino Graul

we're like, oh, it's Kismet. It's gonna be perfect. And so so that's how we ended up with this location here in Dripping Springs.

That explains how they settled in Dripping Springs, but is far from the whole story. My own husband started an alcohol-based venture of his own. [stage whispers] Check them out - Chicago Cane, like sugar cane, Cooperative.

Anyways, I know from first hand experience that there's tons of hoops to jump through before you can even get started.

Gino Graul

And it's highly regulated, as yall know. Kind of weave our way through all the political side of it and permitting and all that and then being in the hill country, we're also in an environmentally sensitive area. So over the Edwards Aquifer recharging zones.

The Edwards Aquifer is a geological region in central Texas where groundwater is absorbed down into the limestone bedrock into underground caves filled with water. The aquifer is where much of the central Texas drinking water is pulled from, so recharge zones are regulated to make sure no toxins are filtering in as well.

Anyways, Texas hydrogeology tangent aside...

Gino Graul

we went through the multicolor yellow and red tape and all this kind of stuff. And it took a couple of years, honestly, to get our building permits. So we bought the land at 2015, brought on our head brewer Nate Seal in 2016.

Oh, and of course there wasn't just a brewery with all the necessary equipment already on site. Debbie and her husband were there from the beginning to help turn a ranch property into a brewery destination.

Debbie Graul

I was down a tractor. I brought my tractor and I was in that field where people park for 29 days. Bush hogging and picking up rocks is a big wall that I made that rock everybody Gino cut hundreds of limbs off a branch it's a trees and everything and then we bush hog all back in here and we really got it everybody pitched in.

And Danneel's planting plants Jensen's putting lights, Yeah, everybody's doing something, you know.

Oh, and I should mention the property wasn't unoccupied exactly.

Debbie Graul

but she didn't take the horses and it was like okay, well, there was corrals, and there was I mean, it was a real farm with well a real ranch with animals. But it was just they had three horses here and it was like okay, so I don't know anything about horses but I know they need to eat

The previous owner had sold and moved away, but she had left several horses behind on the property. Including one that was VERY pregnant.

Debbie Graul

She was mare that a breed mare. And she was just as wild as she could be. And she was this wide. She was so pregnant. It was like, Okay, we need to figure out this because we're not horsey people.

I'm not sure it was ever Gino's intention, but Debbie's first thought was that having the animals could be a fun added attraction.

Debbie Graul

at first I thought it would be so sweet that kids get pet the horses little petting zoo and the goats and stuff like that. And then we start thinking, maybe that's not such a good idea people drinking and horses and kids

After some family deliberation, Danneel came up with a solution.

Debbie Graul

Danneel thought about this and said, Mom, this organization takes horses for handicapped children. So why don't we donate these animals? So that's what we did. We donated the horse and the baby. She also had about a one year old baby. And so that one was named Lucky. I don't remember the mom's name. They were all registered Appaloosa horses.

Gotta say, I'm a little jealous that I never got to visit the horses but I agree they might not be best paired with a lot of day drinking...

Anyways, back on the brewery side, Gino at least had the old owner's home to use as a base of operations as he and head brewer Nate set up how the brewery would be built and organized.

Gino Graul

I was actually living upstairs, so I can oversee the build out of the of the building and all that and then, you know, just come downstairs in the morning and he was an early bird. So he'd always be there. And then you know, we just sit there, across across the table from each other and just, you know, start building this brewery in our heads because we didn't have the permits yet. And so we spent at least it was almost two years

Finally in January of 2018, Family Business Beer Company opened their doors!

[music break]

So, that's the tightly abbreviated story of how FBBC started. But to clarify, I knew literally NONE of this the first time I visited Family Business. I think it was fall of 2019 over Thanksgiving break with my family. Our original plans for a pre-dinner drink fell through and I found a 'new brewery' on google maps that was barely a 15 minute drive from my childhood home. We rolled in, enjoyed a beer or two, and heard the bartender tell us about how the brewery was co-owned by a famous actor. To which, I simply shrugged and went about enjoying my drink.

[sigh] It's a little embarrassing to realize in hindsight. Like, I could've been seated next to Jensen or Danneel and not thought more than, "huh, those are some pretty people."

But I also sort of love that Family Business is also a family affair for me and my brother. Although we were born and raised in Dripping Springs, Texas I've since moved out of state and he's left for Austin. But every time I'm in town, we've made it a point to go to Family Business. It's our sibling reunion spot!

We've been there for crawfish and a pre-wedding welcome party. We've sat on the patio on sweltering summer days and rainy post-holiday winter evenings. It's become our spot, where we can order a flight and sit for hours - catching up on each other's lives.

[music]

And sometimes those mini-reunions, like our visit during the crawfish boil last year, can get a little crazy. Then again, if you've been listening to this podcast all about the Supernatural fandom then I'm sure you can see why.

Actually, opening day of FBBC is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. I'll let Gino tell the story.

Gino Graul

we finally got the space finished out is as best we could and decided we were going to do kind of a soft, semi quiet opening. And so I think with maybe two or three days notice we kind of whispered out on the internet like, Hey, we're gonna, we're gonna open our doors on this day for a soft opening. And, you know, we were still running around kind of trying to put the finishing touches on the tap room and get everything organized. Before we open the door, but we can see that there were there were a few people out there. We had no idea there was 1000 people standing outside the door on day one, we opened the doors and we're like, Hey, welcome everybody.

Turns out, when you have a famous sister and brother-in-law, you might just get bum rushed as soon as fans hear about the new tap room. Apparently the line didn't just go out the door, it basically went down the street!

Gino Graul

Oh my God, it was like four or five across and then went all the way down. About a 40 foot, handicap ramp and staircase, and then all the way down the driveway. To Hamilton pool road. It was bananas.

Getting lots of business when you first launch is good. It's great, in fact! But not when you're expecting a small, soft launch and now suddenly have piles of thirsty customers waiting to try the new brews.

Gino Graul

We had maybe six people that were that were here ready to work, Danneel included. And we had two little iPads that we were going to ring people up you know that this particular point of sale I think was more for like a very casual laid back coffee shop. Not a high volume. You know, you know what, to the walls kind of just insanity right off the bat. And of course, one of the computers goes down immediately because something in some big technical tower in the back office got unplugged.

So no working technology, not many people manning the taps, and a sea of people to get through. Gino and the team quickly pivoted.

Gino Graul

like, Ah, okay, we'll do a cash bar. So I mean, but who has cash these days, you know, or even back in 2018. So we had a small group of people that that got to kind of cut the line but it was absolute utter chaos. To this day when I meet people, they're like, oh, yeah, man, I was there for your for, you know the opening week. And I'm like, I am so freaking sorry.

Not to be constantly drawing comparisons, but I remember the launch party for my husband's rum distillery. He wanted to be sure to get the word out, but we ended up with way more people than seats at the bar - or even space in the building! We had friends seated on the patio as it snowed for that February launch party, so I can relate to Gino's experience at least a tiny bit.

Gino Graul

We ended up actually hiring two people out of the tap room like literally Jensen's, like, we need some help. And two guys set up. Marvis Dixon and Doc Renfro, both ex military guys so you know, you can always count on him. And both of them worked for us for years afterwards for literally hired on the spot. And and man, we were so thankful

It's settled out to a more regular flow since that initial flood.

And if you're a fan who hasn't been out to Family Business Beer Company, you might be wondering what the vibe of this place is. Besides the name with a twofold meaning, the taproom and surrounding grounds aren't covered in SPN paraphernalia. The interior is stained wood high top benches and tables, in an open airy space. There's no Baby (not usually), no angel blades, honestly nothing that would give it away to the normies.

And that's on purpose.

Gino Graul

that was a pretty serious conversation that we had early on. And, you know, Jensen, and I were definitely eye to eye on that one. From people that aren't in the fandom, it could be viewed as, like, Oh, it's just kind of a gimmick type of brewery, and, you know, our passion about beer was rock solid, and really just making real high quality beer was the utmost importance.

Family Business Beer Company is *about the beer*. Showing off the interesting and unique brews and how they fit into an already crowded craft beer scene around the Austin area.

Gino Graul

We wanted to make sure that there was a clear definition between what the brewery does as far as making high quality beers. And having that, that built-in fan base.

Family Business just happens to get a little family help.

Gino Graul

we do have that, that element of, you know, celebrity status, with Jensen and that kind of stuff. But moving into a city that's known for its craft beer industry, we wanted to make sure that it was understood right out of the gate that the beer was the rockstar.

[record scratch]

I just have to cut in here and say that this wasn't always the case for Central Texas. As someone who was born and raised out in Dripping Springs, AKA Drip, when it was a one stoplight town, we had all sorts of liquor prohibitions on the books and it was hard to find a decent beer at the grocery store. In fact, my dad used to home brew beer for himself and make rootbeer for us kids to make up for the lack of options.

But I digress, the Austin area now has a well-established craft beer scene that Family Business has to compete in, on their own merits. And I think they definitely hold their own. They certainly have the regulars to show for it!

Gino Graul

we built our base of regulars that that live out here and people that have moved out to the area that that come out. And then and just love the beer and the space and the pizza. It's funny, every once in a while. When Jensen's here, you know, he might be out

in the grove, and he's got sunglasses and hat and all that kind of stuff. And somebody's like, I think that's him. So then walk over a real Excuse me, Mr. Ackles. And then when one person sees that, okay, and the contact has been made, you know, somebody's initiating contact than two or three people, and then all of a sudden, you've got this line of people waiting to talk to this one guy, and the regulars are like, What the hell is going on here?

Back to the fandom aspect...

Gino Graul

we had to start bolting them down to the ground and concrete blocks and that kind of stuff. So if there are a few people out there they might be listening right now that we love that sign back.

Apparently the original sign for the brewery on Hamilton Pool Road was a hand-painted creation by Danneel. And it "walked off" the property, never to return.

[laughs] It's a bit like the real Abbey Road having no street signs because they kept getting stolen. Apparently the SPN family has a few members with sticky fingers.

It ALSO explains why when I had Misha Collins sign the metal beer sign I bought at Family Business, he asked if I had stolen it! I later told Jensen what Misha had said and he just laughed.

Gino Graul

we had branded glassware. So we wanted you know, when people came in, they could see the family business logo on the glassware, not realizing that you know, with about eight people working and everybody's running around in the tap room taking care of beers, bussing the tables, that I think it was 1100 pieces of glassware just happened to walk off the property. And like, okay, so bad idea.

By the time I made my first visit to Family Business, the glassware was the plain, unmarked pint glasses that were less likely to disappear mysteriously.

Gino Graul

we had to bolt everything down. But lesson learned.

[Music break]

The upside of having so many fans of Supernatural turn up, is that the brewery gets visitors from all over!

Gino Graul

we normally say that they they've made a pilgrimage from wherever they come from, but we've had people from New Zealand, Australia, India, Pakistan, all over the UK. Let's see. Switzerland, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, France. I mean, you name it. And we probably had somebody here. We're talking about maybe putting up a big map on the wall where people can put push pins of where they're from, but all different types of people from all over the world all different types of walks of life.

Gino's Mom, Debbie, agreed.

Debbie Graul

you know every time we come out here, we meet different different fans that have come people come from literally all over the world

Back to Gino:

Gino Graul

we still have a ton of people that that live in Dripping Springs have never heard of us. You know, so So we're almost kind of like an undiscovered gem for a lot locals but are sought out by by others.

And because they get sought out by fans of Supernatural. Or, The Boys, or Big Sky. Anyways, because Family Business is a destination for many fans, they end up with a lot more folks who aren't beer drinkers coming in.

Or at least, aren't beer drinkers yet...

Gino Graul

that was something that that we understood pretty early on is that a lot of people that were coming out here were coming to see Jensen's brewery and kind of experience it firsthand, and a lot of them weren't really familiar with craft beer. So we kind of took that responsibility seriously, that, hey, we are going to be that first beer that they try. That's craft beer.

Even Debbie said she wasn't much of a beer drinker!

Debbie Graul

I'm single malt scotch whiskey person.

But part of being a brewery is about introducing people to new beers they've never tried before. Or even just the different categories of beer to start. And as the craft beer scene has grown, folks like Family Business have learned how to present new beers for a novice audience.

Gino Graul

When you go to a winery, you know, you hear you hear the story about you know, these different wines. And then by the time you get to try them, you really appreciate the time and the creativity and the passion that went into them. And so it's the exact same thing with beer,

Gino Graul

we took that responsibility, seriously to make sure that we were going to be good stewards for the craft beer industry.

Non-beer drinkers might assume that all beer tastes like the cheap lagers they first tried at a college party or snuck from their parents fridge. But there are so many different styles of beer! Lagers and ales. Dark brews and lighter, crisp summer drinks. Smokey styles and sours. You just have to learn a bit about the flavor profiles you prefer.

Debbie Graul

it's a development of your taste buds. And so I'm not an IPA person. But man, Nate has hit it on one called Critical Liquid.

Critical liquid is a juicy IPA with tropical fruit notes. If you're a classic west-coast style hop head, it might not work for you. But it's a great starter beer for those who like a lot of fruit flavors to shine through.

And the Nate Debbie referred to was the previous head brewer at Family Business.

Gino Graul

Our new brewers name is Cosmos Tarantino. And he's as cool as His name sounds, for sure. And he makes fantastic beer.

After this episode, I hope you're considering a little pilgrimage down to my hometown. Hell, make an Austin weekend of it and visit Sac Jac Saloon, a bar co-owned by Jared Padalecki in Austin!

Austin has changed a LOT since my childhood days, and not always for the better. Like, the climate change induced killer summer heat and insanely unaffordable housing market...[sigh] But, I still think it's worth the visit.

Just, if you do visit, be a polite fan. Otherwise, you'll end up featured in one of Gino's stories.

Gino Graul

And then, as far as some of the weird stuff we've had people leave some, some questionable things on the property. One time we were really busy. The whole Grove was packed and my tap room manager came, came over to me, he's like, Hey, there's this thing hanging in one of the trees is like, oh, boy, I was like, did you take it down? He was like, I think you just need to look at it. I'm like, okay, so we go to the back of the grove. And it is just a severed doll head, you know, that like one of these creepy looking dolls, just the head hanging from a tree. And so we walk up and it's facing us and I'm like, boy, that's disturbing. And it's like, right by the playground and, and families are looking at it, like What the hell's going on? And I was like, alright, well, let's get this thing down. And when I grabbed it, and like turned it, it had Jensen written on the back of it. Okay, all right. Yeah, let's, let's get this out of here. Like Sorry, folks just did a three point shot into the trashcan,

[laughs] Thankfully these kinds of occurrences are rare! The more common version isn't things left in-person, so much as it is the odd mail that gets delivered to them.

Gino Graul

we've definitely gotten some, some odd things sent to us in the mail. So obviously, I'm willing to take one for the team. So if Jensen gets a package, I open it to make sure it's, it's nothing too weird or scary or, you know.

I guess since Jensen's address isn't public [aside] and with good reason [end] gifts that would normally be shipped to him are instead mailed to the brewery! Gino described some of the gorgeous art he's seen over the years: charcoal sketches and paintings and other hand-crafted gifts.

Although sometimes even those can end up being weird in their own right.

Gino Graul

Or they'll draw a picture or paint a picture or something like that. And I'm like, Ah, this is cool. Now turn around, there's like a clipping of hair, like taped to the back of it, like, All right, once again.

Rather than trashing these packages, Gino and his staff decided to put them on display. Just, not for public viewing...

Gino Graul

for a long, long time, the real odd things we had. We had hung up in our bathroom and so Jensen would come in, and we just, it was like, it was like a freak show art gallery. He'd walk in like, Boy ha like Yeah, thanks, man. Appreciate that.

It became a sort of in-joke for the staff and Jensen. Seeing what new items got added to the bathroom gallery.

Gino Graul

All the staff knew was in there, you know? So they go in and like you, you could spend 20 minutes and they're just like looking around at all the new crazy weird stuff. And and Jensen, anytime he would come in, he's like, Oh, is there anything new like, Oh, we got this one, you know, so he looked at that.

But just because the staff was in on the secret didn't mean it didn't still cause confusion.

Gino Graul

But then we'd have like a delivery guys, you know that we're dropping off ingredients and that kind of stuff. There are UPS guy or somebody like that. And like, Hey, man, do you have a bathroom? I can use like, yes, but we have to at least explain what's going on in there. And they normally come out in their eyes are huge. Like, wow, like, yeah, you might want to you might want to stop elsewhere. But yeah, it's it's funny nonetheless.

I won't lie, the last time I visited Family Business over Labor Day weekend, I was SO looking forward to seeing this art collection for myself. But when I asked Gino about it, he told me they had been on a cleaning spree and had cleared it out. There was a picture of Gino, Danneel, and Jensen with googly eyes glued on but none of the other art made it, sadly.

That said....

While the staff bathroom is no longer a 'gallery of the weird,' that actually presents us with a unique opportunity! After chatting with Gino, he agreed to let me run a little contest! Send your best, your weirdest, your most creative fanart to the brewery. [I'll have the address written in the show notes.] You MUST tie the piece back to Family

Business Beer Company in some fashion - whether that be using their logo, slogan, or some other elements.

Gino and a panel of judges that he selects will be in charge of determining the winner(s). Besides having your art proudly displayed in the new bathroom art gallery, winners will also get a swag prize from the brewery!

Make sure to send your art by December 15th to be eligible to win!

[music starts]

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In Defense of Fandom was made possible through an unhealthy obsession, and your support via ko-fi. If you're not already supporting the show and you'd like to, you can find a link in the show notes to our ko-fi. Your support is deeply appreciated.

Oh, and don't forget! If you donate any amount on the ko-fi, you'll get access to some of the full, raw interviews conducted during this season. The conversation with Rachel Miner is already out, as is the full interview with Billy Moran and Steven Norton of Loudon Swain!

[bonus outtake]

Gino Graul

we worked, we worked for months, on trying to get all of this organized, and it was going to be great. And there weren't going to be any long lines. And nobody would have to wait for a beer for food for crawfish, or for the bathroom or anything along that line. It's gonna be sweet. And then Jensen went online and he was like, Well, if you're down in Austin, Texas, come on out to the crawfish boil. I know I'm gonna eat 20 pounds. And all that went out the window we got destroyed.

Gino Graul

we're sitting there with our with our face in our hands like, oh my god, you know, once again.

Gino Graul

we took his phone away from him. He's not allowed anymore.