FREE GUIDE · PRE-OPENING PLAYBOOK

Restaurant & Brewery Pre-Opening Playbook

The full timeline, master checklist, and guide to what actually has to happen before a restaurant or brewery opens — concept through first 90 days.

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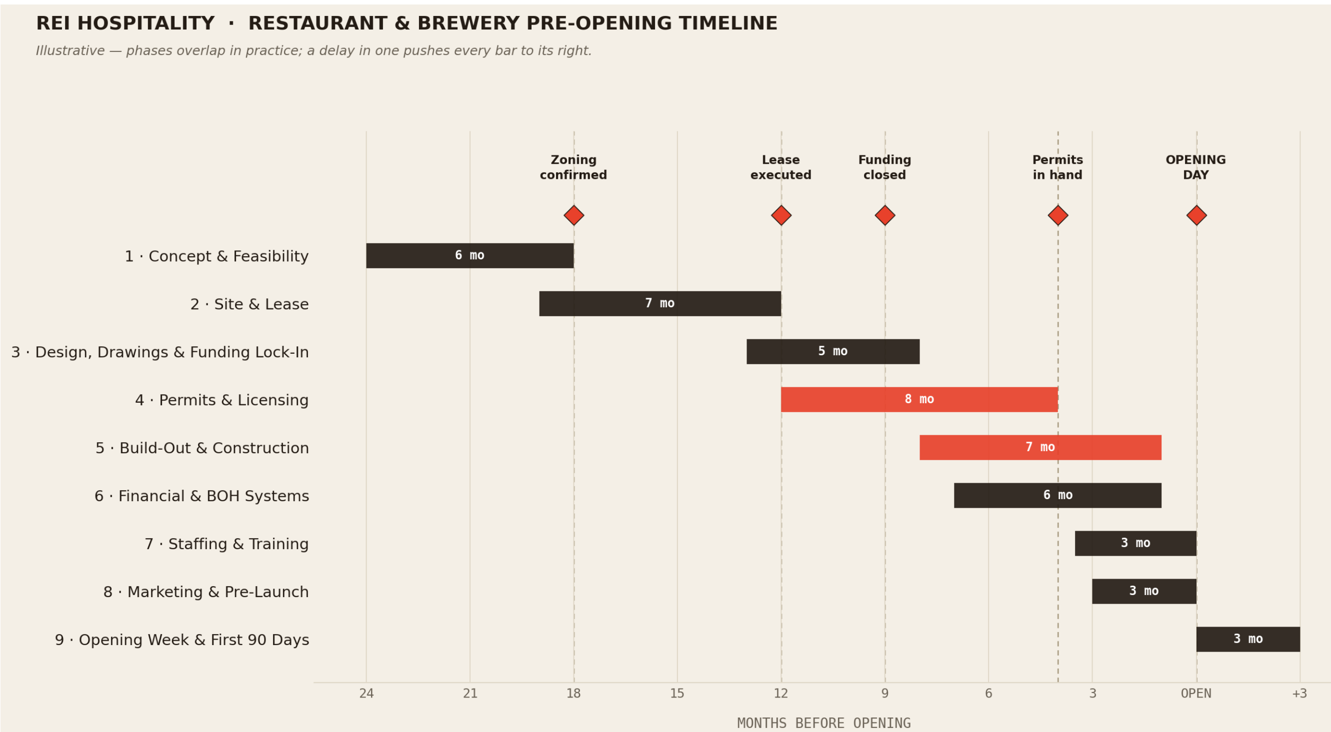
PART 1

The Timeline

Built for a full ground-up or heavy-renovation project. A lighter-lift build compresses; a brewery or entertainment concept usually stretches — mostly in Phase 4, where licensing lives.



Phases run concurrently, not back-to-back — and a slip in one bar drags every bar downstream of it. No phase on this chart fails quietly: a missed gate in month 18 shows up as a missed opening a year later.

PART 2

The Master Checklist

The actionable spine of the whole project, organized by phase. Part 3 explains why each line matters and what a real one looks like.

PHASE 1 · CONCEPT & FEASIBILITY

18–24 months out

- ☐ Concept and service style defined (cuisine/format, brewery vs. kitchen vs. both)
- ☐ **Target customer profile written down** — not a vague label
- ☐ Competitive/market landscape reviewed for the target trade area
- ☐ Pro forma built at 2–3 volume scenarios, not just one guess
- ☐ Funding sources identified and use-of-proceeds roughed out
- ☐ Leverage/equity split modeled against a target cash-on-cash return
- ☐ Go/no-go decision made and documented

PHASE 2 · SITE & LEASE

10–14 months out

- ☐ Location Data Report (LDR) commissioned or self-assembled
- ☐ Traffic counts pulled (or physically counted) for candidate sites
- ☐ Demographic rings reviewed (1/3/5/10 mile)
- ☐ Site criteria scorecard completed for each candidate
- ☐ LOI negotiated and reviewed against the term checklist
- ☐ **Zoning/use confirmation completed with the town — before signing**
- ☐ Lease executed with Landlord's Work exhibit attached
- ☐ TI allowance payout conditions understood and calendared

PHASE 3 · DESIGN, DRAWINGS & FUNDING LOCK-IN

9–12 months out

- ☐ Design firm engaged, scope confirmed (design / production / CA phases)
- ☐ Zoning/variance representation scope confirmed — in or out of architect's contract
- ☐ Schematic design approved
- ☐ Engineering consultants (MEP/structural/civil/fire) engaged
- ☐ Construction drawings completed and stamped
- ☐ **Long-lead equipment list started and first orders placed**
- ☐ Funding fully closed — not "in process"
- ☐ Design-build vs. design-bid-build decision made

PHASE 4 · PERMITS & LICENSING

6–12 months out

- ☐ Building and fire permit applications filed
- ☐ Health department plan review submitted
- ☐ Liquor license application filed (state-specific — confirm local process)
- ☐ TTB federal brewery approval filed (if applicable)
- ☐ State ABC brewery/manufacturer permit filed (after TTB in hand, if applicable)
- ☐ Sign permit filed
- ☐ Local utility/environmental requirements confirmed (e.g., grease interceptor sizing)
- ☐ All permits in hand before construction start date

PHASE 5 · BUILD-OUT & CONSTRUCTION

6–9 months out

- ☐ **GC bids leveled against a common scope checklist** — not just price
- ☐ GC awarded, contract executed
- ☐ Owner's rep / PM engaged (if using one)
- ☐ Baseline schedule with critical path established
- ☐ Long-lead items confirmed on order with delivery dates tracked
- ☐ Change order / RFI log started and kept current
- ☐ Inspection calendar built (rough-in, final, health, fire)
- ☐ Weekly site meetings scheduled for the duration of the build

PHASE 6 · FINANCIAL & BACK-OF-HOUSE SYSTEMS

6–9 months out

- ☐ Chart of accounts built out
- ☐ Business insurance bound (GL, auto, umbrella, workers' comp)
- ☐ Vendor credit applications submitted
- ☐ Recipe/costing cards built for core menu items
- ☐ Menu engineered against target food/liquor cost
- ☐ POS selected; site survey scheduled
- ☐ Vendor list built across every category
- ☐ Banking set up, including on-site petty cash process

PHASE 7 · STAFFING & TRAINING

3–4 months out

- ☐ Org chart and hiring sequence set (management before hourly)
- ☐ Management hire(s) made with enough runway to train before opening
- ☐ Training environment/location confirmed and ready
- ☐ New-hire training program built (day-by-day, not open-ended shadowing)
- ☐ SOPs documented for opening/closing and core stations
- ☐ Hourly hiring plan and schedule built

FINAL PRE-OPEN PUNCH LIST

The last checklist before training begins

- ☐ Certificate of occupancy received
- ☐ All licenses received (liquor, health, business, sales tax)
- ☐ Equipment and millwork installation complete, vendor startups scheduled
- ☐ POS installed, menu and pricing programmed and validated
- ☐ Signage and exterior elements complete
- ☐ Life-safety and fire systems tested
- ☐ Joint construction + operations walkthrough completed — **only minor items outstanding**
- ☐ If major items are still open, training start date has been pushed, not forced

PHASE 8 · MARKETING & PRE-LAUNCH

2–3 months out

- ☐ Brand, website, and social channels live
- ☐ Pre-open marketing budget allocated across channels
- ☐ PR/community outreach started
- ☐ Reservations system set up
- ☐ Soft-opening / friends & family guest list built

PHASE 9 · OPENING WEEK & FIRST 90 DAYS

- ☐ 2 weeks out: friends & family invites sent, all checklists above closed, petty cash/banking on-site
- ☐ 1 week out: friends & family event held, final systems check run
- ☐ Opening day
- ☐ 30 days: actual costs reconciled against pro forma
- ☐ 90 days: staff retention check-in, cash flow monitored against plan

PART 3

The Details

What follows explains the checklist above — the reasoning, the real templates, and worked examples. Not the how-to-execute-it, but enough substance to actually be useful.

PHASE 1 · CONCEPT & FEASIBILITY · 18–24 MONTHS OUT

Target customer — with actual specificity

A usable customer profile isn't a demographic label like "25–45, suburban." It's specific enough that you could picture the person walking in. At minimum it defines: who they are (age range, household type, income band), the occasion (weekly regular vs. special occasion vs. pre/post-event), spend per visit and how often they return, and the one reason they choose you over the place next door.

> *Example: Suburban professional, 30–50, comes Thursday/Friday with 2–3 friends after work. Spends $40–55 per person. Returns 2–3x a month. Chooses this concept over competitors because it's the only place nearby with a serious beer list and a kitchen still firing past 10pm.*

That level of specificity is what actually drives menu pricing, seat count, and hours — a vague label doesn't.

A worked sample pro forma

Illustrative numbers at a $6M annual net sales scenario — the categories and relationships matter more than the exact figures:

Line	$	% of Net Sales
Food sales	$1,836,000	30.6%
Beer, liquor & wine sales	$4,009,000	66.8%
Other (retail, cover, events)	$275,000	4.6%
Comps & discounts	($120,000)	(2.0%)
Net Sales	$6,000,000	100%
Cost of goods sold	$1,134,000	18.9%
Total labor	$1,456,000	24.3%
Prime Cost (COGS + Labor)	$2,590,000	43.2%
Operating expenses	~$1,500,000	~25%
Cash flow before debt service / rent	**~$1,900,000**	**~32%**

The number worth watching isn't net sales — it's **prime cost as a percentage of sales.** That same concept run near breakeven volume might show prime cost closer to 50–52%; at strong volume it can run 38–42%. That swing between scenarios — not the top-line number — is what determines whether an investor's return target actually gets hit. This is why Phase 1 should model at least a breakeven case and a target case side by side, not a single projection.

Funding and leverage — a worked example

Say total project cost (build-out + equipment + opening working capital) runs $2,000,000. Financed 65% debt / 35% equity means a $1,300,000 loan and $700,000 of equity at risk. An SBA 7(a) loan specifically requires the use of proceeds broken into buckets — real estate, construction, equipment, working capital, debt refinancing — plus estimated jobs created/retained, and full ownership disclosure for every equity holder, not just the majority owner. Knowing this structure before applying saves a round of back-and-forth with a lender.

Cash-on-cash return = annual pre-tax cash flow ÷ total cash invested (the equity piece, not the debt). On $700,000 of equity, $150,000 of annual cash flow after debt service is a ~21% cash-on-cash return; $70,000 is 10%. The leverage decision — how much debt vs. equity — moves that ratio more than almost anything else in the deal.

> NON-STANDARD CONCEPTS
>
> **Brewpub** — TTB + state ABC brewery licensing *and* a retail/restaurant liquor license overlapping on the same footprint; production and consumption areas often have separate code requirements.
>
> **Virtual golf / simulator concepts** — amusement/entertainment licensing on top of F&B licensing, AV and low-voltage build-out as its own trade, liability insurance considerations specific to simulator use.

PHASE 2 · SITE & LEASE · 10–14 MONTHS OUT

The LDR, in practice

A real Location Data Report is more rigorous than most first-time operators expect: demographics at multiple rings out (commonly 1, 3, 5, and 10 miles), traffic counts (real site work often means physically counting cars for a set window every hour across a full week, in both directions — not just pulling a municipal estimate), activity generation nearby (offices, medical, schools, entertainment, transportation hubs), accessibility mapping (physical barriers that quietly cut off a trade area: divided highways, railroad tracks, rivers, large open space), and competitive mapping. Skipping this is the single most common "why did we pick this corner" regret.

A worked LOI term sheet

Term	What a real one looks like
Length & renewal	10-year term, three 5-year options, ~10% rent step at each renewal
Base rent	$30/rentable SF NNN, stepped 10% every 5 years
Due diligence period	~30 days from LOI execution to confirm feasibility before you're locked in
TI allowance	$50/SF — paid only after CO, proof of opening, GC lien waivers, as-built CAD, first month's rent
Rent commencement	Earlier of opening or 180 days after lease execution / permit receipt
CAM / taxes	**$2.50 CAM + $5.00 tax per SF, trued up annually**

The gap between "TI committed" and "TI in hand" is one of the most common cash-flow surprises for first-time operators — budget your own capital to bridge it.

Zoning & use confirmation

A direct conversation with the local zoning/planning department to confirm your concept is a permitted use — *before* you sign anything or spend on design. Reason it matters, concretely: zoning parking ratios are frequently written around a standard restaurant, not a brewery/entertainment hybrid with a different patron-floor-area-to-seating ratio.

> *Real example of the gap this creates: a concept planning roughly 16,000 sq ft of patron floor area, under a straightforward "1 space per 40 sq ft of patron area" formula, computes to over 400 required parking spaces — against maybe 111 actually available on site. That's not a rounding error; it's a formal variance application and public hearing before anything else can move.*

Confirming this before signing, not after, is the difference between a delay and a dead deal.

PHASE 3 · DESIGN, DRAWINGS & FUNDING LOCK-IN · 9–12 MONTHS OUT

How a design engagement is actually structured and priced

Task	Typical duration	What it produces
1. Design (schematic)	5–6 weeks, 1 meeting	Floor plan, mood/material boards, initial renderings
2. Production (permit + CDs)	6–10 weeks, several meetings	Full stamped set: floor plans, RCP, roof plan, elevations, F&B equipment, millwork, MEP/structural coordination
3. Construction administration	**Duration of build, 4–5 site visits**	**Site visits at defined intervals (e.g., 30/60/90-day marks), a banked hour allotment**

On a renovation in the $5–6M range, a full architectural fee (across all three tasks) commonly lands in the 3–4% of construction cost range, with MEP engineering as a separate line often quoted as a range (e.g., $64,000–$74,000) until scope is fully defined. **Zoning/variance representation is commonly excluded** from that scope entirely — a separate, separately billed addendum. That's a second, structural reason the zoning conversation in Phase 2 can't be outsourced to "the architect will handle it."

Long-lead items — track these the moment drawings start

Item	Typical lead time
Switchgear	~12 weeks
Kitchen equipment package	~12 weeks
Rooftop HVAC units	~10 weeks
Millwork / custom casework	~10 weeks
Lighting controls	~10 weeks
Fire alarm panel & devices	~8 weeks
HVAC controls	~8 weeks
Grease interceptor	**~8 weeks**

Every one of these carries its own submittal-review-and-approval cycle *before* the lead-time clock even starts. Miss flagging these during design and they — not the trade work on-site — become the reason opening slips by months, not weeks.

Funding lock-in needs to actually close here, not just be "in progress." Design and permitting commitments are hard to unwind once made.

PHASE 4 · PERMITS & LICENSING · 6–12 MONTHS OUT

Zoning permit and building/fire permits — top of the list, and for larger builds routinely the longest pole in the tent.

Liquor license — genuinely different state to state

Applications are commonly rejected outright if incomplete, with local approvals (zoning sign-off, fire marshal, town clerk certification) often required *before* a state agency will even accept the filing. Many states use a public-notice/"placarding" process before a permit can move forward — a placarding error alone can add two or more months. For breweries specifically: expect two licensing tracks in *sequence*, not parallel — TTB federal approval, then a state manufacturer/brew-pub permit that often requires proof of the federal approval already in hand. Filing fees themselves are modest (commonly $400–$1,600 depending on permit type); the real cost is the multi-month timeline risk, not the fee.

Local utility/environmental requirements can surface late

> *Real example: a local water/sewer authority requiring a specific grease-interceptor configuration — e.g., two 3,500-gallon in-ground tanks with a specific filter and sampling box on the discharge side — discovered only at a pre-construction meeting with that authority, well after sitework plans were thought to be settled. This is a genuine redesign risk, not a paperwork delay.*

The permit sequencing trap — variance/special-exception approval often has to be secured before formal permit applications will even be accepted, and both usually require finished drawings. This is exactly why Phase 3 has to close before Phase 4 can meaningfully start.

What "apples to apples" bid-leveling actually looks like

Scope item checked	Contractor A	Contractor B	Contractor C
Demo per drawings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stamped/calc'd shop drawings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Materials meet spec	Yes	Yes	Yes
Full field coordination w/ other trades	Yes	Yes	Yes
Meets stated duration	Yes	Yes	Yes
Submittals, as-builts, O&Ms included	Yes	Yes	Yes
All taxes included	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leveled base bid	**$84,000**	**$70,000**	**$75,000**

Two bids that look $15,000 apart on the cover page can be identical in true scope once leveled — or wildly different. You can't tell which without a checklist like this one. The same principle applies to sitework bids, which routinely reveal missing scope that only shows up when bids are laid side by side line by line.

Keeping your contractor on schedule

Consider a project manager / owner's representative distinct from your GC — someone whose incentive lines up with your schedule and budget, not the trade's. Their real value: leveling bids (above), running value-engineering conversations *before* award instead of after (when it becomes a change order), and building a genuine baseline schedule with a critical path. Even with a PM engaged, the owner is typically still the one submitting permit applications, procuring FF&E, and approving finish/material selections — a PM manages the schedule, not your decisions.

Sequencing dependencies that actually stop a job

Framing layout needs architect/owner sign-off before the next trade proceeds; underslab utility work needs inspection *before* backfill and concrete; structural steel and mezzanine work often has its own inspection gate before it can be enclosed. Each of these is a real stop-work point, not a formality — and each is exactly what a tracked RFI/change-order log is supposed to catch before it becomes a two-week delay.

WHERE THIS GOES WRONG (PHASES 2–5)

Signing a lease before confirming zoning · committing to equipment before MEP drawings are final · treating a TI allowance as available cash · underestimating liquor license timing · assuming your architect covers zoning/variance work · letting a GC's optimistic schedule stand in for a real one · missing long-lead items until construction is underway · discovering a utility requirement after sitework is "final."

PHASE 6 · FINANCIAL & BACK-OF-HOUSE SYSTEMS · 6–9 MONTHS OUT

Chart of accounts

More granular than most first-time operators expect. A real restaurant chart of accounts separates, for example, cash on hand from a change bank from petty cash from the main operating account — each its own GL line — and breaks out every revenue and cost category the same way the pro forma does in Phase 1. Setting this up before you're taking in cash is what makes your first real P&L usable instead of a reconstruction project three months in.

Insurance — what's actually on a certificate

Coverage	Typical limit
General liability	$1M per occurrence / $2M aggregate
Auto liability	$1M combined single limit
Umbrella / excess liability	$1M per occurrence/aggregate, over a $10K retention
Workers' compensation	**Statutory + $1M employer's liability**

Landlords and GCs are also commonly named as "additional insured" with a waiver of subrogation and "primary and non-contributory" status — a specific endorsement your broker has to add, not something that happens automatically by having a policy.

Vendor accounts

A real vendor credit application asks for business ownership/tax ID info, bank references, and trade references, and often includes a security interest/UCC lien against business assets as a condition of extending credit — with financial statements required above a purchase-volume threshold (commonly ~$25,000/month). Budget the time; it's more paperwork than a simple order form.

Recipe and costing cards

A standardized recipe card specifies exact quantities, a yield percentage (accounting for prep loss), and often a specific portioning tool — a numbered scoop/disher size, for example — so cost and portion consistency don't depend on any one cook's judgment call. A card without a yield % and a named portioning tool isn't actually controlling cost, it's just a list of ingredients.

Vendor categories to plan for

Signage, HVAC/mechanical, AV/sound, dish and warewashing, kitchen and bar equipment, draft beer systems (if applicable), CO2, glycol chiller (if brewing), electrical, network/security, flooring, fire suppression, POS. POS hardware ordering commonly requires a dedicated site survey first — a step people forget to schedule early enough.

PHASE 7 · STAFFING & TRAINING · 3–4 MONTHS OUT

Management training that actually works

Shares a few features: it commonly runs 6–8 weeks, starting in the front-of-house before moving into full management responsibility, with a defined "transition" week before they're on their own. It runs in a validated, certified training location — a specific restaurant confirmed ready to train someone — not an ad hoc "shadow whoever's around." A formal orientation (handbook, facility tour, values/culture) sets expectations on day one. And it includes structured check-ins on a cadence — weekly during training, then 30/60/90-day check-ins after they're placed — which catch a struggling hire months before an ad hoc approach would notice.

New-hire training, day by day

Day	Focus	Gate to pass
0	Orientation, handbook, facility tour	General knowledge quiz
0.5	Combined food & drink class + bar walkthrough	Safety/sanitation + menu quizzes
1	Follow #1 — shadow a coach	Short quiz
2	Follow #2 + expo assist	Cumulative quiz
3	Follow #3 + drink expo	Cumulative quiz
4	Follow #4 + one-table reverse follow	Final study day
5	**Validation shift — mock table service, evaluated**	**Minimum ~90% to work solo**

The structure works because it front-loads a manageable amount of new information each day instead of dumping everything on day one, and it ends with an actual competency check instead of just "time served."

PHASE 8 · MARKETING & PRE-LAUNCH · 2–3 MONTHS OUT

A worked pre-open marketing budget

Illustrative — spans roughly the period from a few months out through six weeks post-opening:

Category	% of budget	Notes
Outdoor / billboards	~25%	Highest single line in most plans
Branding & creative	~20%	Logo, photography, brand assets
Local radio	~13%	
Website	~10%	
Local transit / print	~8%	
Paid social ads	~8%	
Grand-opening giveaways	~4%	
Ad copy / photoshoots	~4%	
Video	~3%	
Social media management	~2%	Ongoing monthly, not one-time
PR	**Often $0 cash**	**Still needs someone's time — budget the hours**

Treating this as a single "marketing" line instead of these distinct categories is how first-time operators either overspend one channel or leave real gaps in others.

PHASE 9 · OPENING WEEK & FIRST 90 DAYS

When	What happens
~2 weeks out	Friends & family invites distributed; every checklist above closed; petty cash and banking live on-site; staff have passed their validation shift
~1 week out	Friends & family event; final systems check
Opening day	—
+30 days	Actual costs reconciled against the Phase 1 pro forma
+90 days	**Staff retention check-in; cash flow monitored against plan**

This is the what.

We handle the how — from the first feasibility conversation through opening night and everything after.

ellis@reihospitality.com
203.654.9720
reihospitality.com