

**Construction & Real Estate** 8

Kalkaska's historic Hotel Sieting to rise again; the northern real estate boom you're missing out on; the where, what and when of four changing bay fronts.

**Arts, Culture & Festivals** 22



Big money in the North's big fish fests, TC's new Blackbird Arts opens to inspire all ages, more.

**Education & Training** 30



Private v. public v. charter school enrollment Up North, NMC tailor-making college for local companies, test your – or your boss' – emotional intelligence, more.

**Exposures** 42



Inside the TCBN's private party for TC's 20 most powerful women, more.



Photo by Andy Wakeman

# Genius in a Bottle

## Carlson and Lobdell's eatery empire taps into the spirits – and brews – of the North.

By Al Parker

TRAVERSE CITY – Who cares that Greg Lobdell and Jon Carlson had been friends since their kindergarten days at Old Mission Elementary. When the longtime pals decided to

embark together into the very grown up business of real estate development in 2005, they heralded their partnership as any two adults would: They hired a lawyer. They drafted a contract.

And then they sent a copy to Dad – Lobdell's dad, Wayne, to be exact, an experienced investor and entrepreneur whom at last count owned 72 Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC restaurants.

The senior Lobdell's response? It would set the course for one of the most successful business partnerships

in northern Michigan's recent restaurant history:

*"While I understand that having these documents is essential, as I am sure you are aware, these type of agreements are only as good as the character and compatibility of the principals. Fortunately, I believe the two of you possess all the skills as well as those important intangible qualities for a lasting partnership.*

*As time goes on, various elements of your respective contribution to projects may not always be proportionate on individual proj-*

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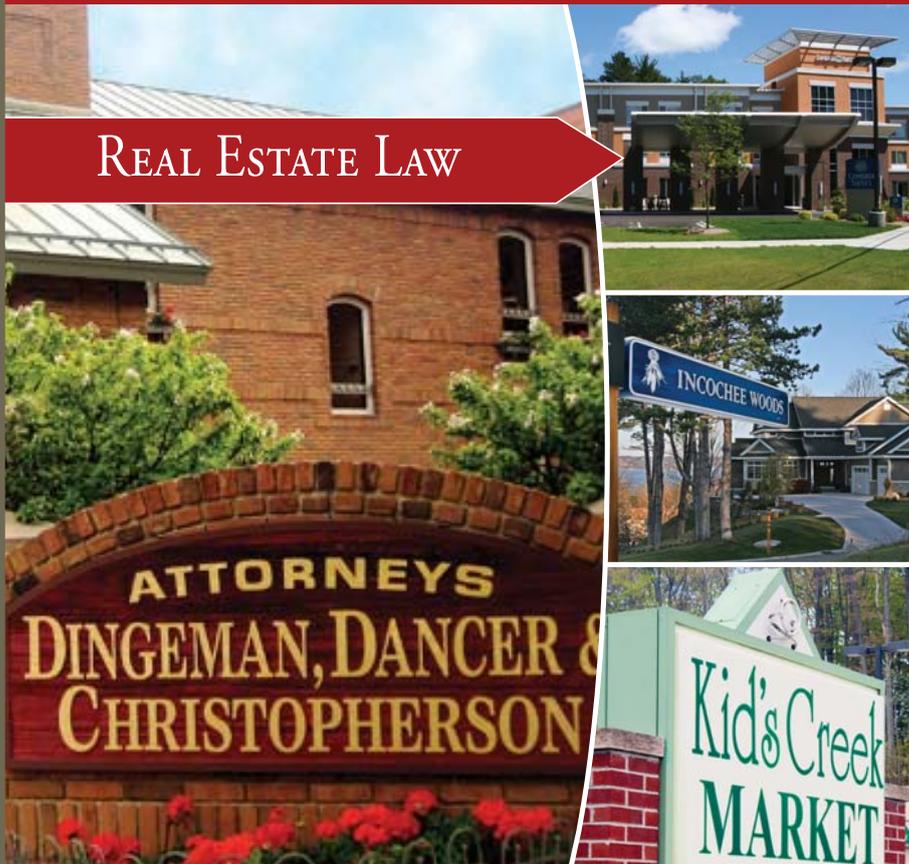
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GENIUS IN A BOTTLE CONT'D FROM COVER

*ects. The total objective is what counts. Mistakes will be made and disappointments will occur and the documents will not cover every circumstance.*

*Actually, once the documents are signed, I doubt that you will ever need them again.*

*A few simple words will be more important than all the documents and legal advice you can obtain ... fairness, flexibility, and always sharing credit for success and failures. The fact that your commitment to your friendship, loyalty, and fairness takes priority over money will lead you to solve any unexpected development...you are destined to great success." – Dad*

The senior Lobdell's letter is posted on the website of the pair's real estate development business, 2 Mission Design and Development, as both a

reminder and a resonant philosophy of the way Carlson and Lobdell work.

By all indications, it – and they – are working exceptionally well.

Today, the pair has some 900 employees working in 13 restaurant/brewery concepts in seven Michigan locations. In northern Michigan they operate the North Peak Brewing Co., Kilkenny's Pub, Mission Table, Jolly Pumpkin, Blue Tractor Cook Shop, and The Shed. Downstate they operate restaurants in Ann Arbor and Royal Oak, plus a brewing facility in Dexter.



Lobdell (far left) and Carlson (far right) are directly involved in the brewing process.

On a recent day, the pair made the drive from their Ann Arbor headquarters to visit their TC operations and meet with the *Traverse City Business*

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"We have received so many great words of wisdom from Jon's parents, and my parents," Lobdell says. "And they have all led by example. That email from my Dad is a symbol of all the great words of wisdom that all of our parents have given us."

Currently their energy is poured into the Northern United Brewing Co., which produces the North Peak and Jolly Pumpkin family of beers, an assortment of Bonafide Wines, and a line of distilled Civilized Spirits.

"That's where our focus has been for the last two years," says Lobdell, who turns 40 this month. "We've really been paying attention to producing the beers, wines and spirits."

The Civilized Spirits line includes vodka made with distilled grapes, Jakura featuring distilled cherries, gin using local juniper and rum distilled with Michigan sugar beets.

Unlike the restaurants, which boast experienced staffers running the day-to-day operations, Northern United is directly overseen by Carlson and Lobdell, plus brewmasters Mike Hall and Ron Jeffries.

"We realized we had to run this operation," says the 40-year-old Carlson. "And, frankly, it took us a while. But since November, we've felt very comfortable with it."

About half of Northern United's beers are produced in its 5,600 square foot facility at the Jolly Pumpkin on Old Mission Peninsula, while the rest are brewed at the Dexter operation.

"Northern United uses 20,000 pounds of Old Mission cherries from the Kroupa Farm, 10,000 pounds of hops grown on Old Mission and 62,000 pounds of Michigan grapes," says Lobdell. "The spent grain from the brewery goes to a local pig farmer, then the manure from the pigs is used to fertilize the hops."

Despite a pretty impressive record of successes, not every 2 Mission project has been a home run. In 2008, they opened Café Habana adjacent to the Blue Tractor Cook Shop, bringing Cuban cuisine to Traverse City. In about two years, it was shut down.

"It was going fine," explains Lobdell. "But we had two separate kitchens, and it just wasn't efficient to operate in this location. It wasn't the concept. Business was good. It was a hard decision, but Café Habana could return to Traverse City if we find the right location."

While Carlson and Lobdell are the faces of 2 Mission, they are quick to note that they have many other partners and investors who make their success possible. For each of their eatery projects, they assemble a team of investors and partners.

"A lot of people have invested in

these projects," explains Lobdell. "Most are people who offer their advice when we ask. Otherwise, they're very busy with their own projects. And we couldn't be successful without our managers and staff."

But it's the longtime friendship between Lobdell and Carlson that is the glue behind 2 Mission.

"Everyone assumes we agree on everything," adds Carlson. "That's not always so, but we've been friends since kindergarten, and when you know someone that long, you trust and respect their judgment."

"Greg is the only one of us who is formally trained in development. He's an architect and received his MBA from Columbia. He has the technical skills; I do not. I get overly optimistic sometimes. He's optimistic, but he's a realist. He likes more structure than I do," says Carlson.

"Jon has tons of strengths," counters Lobdell. "He's an incredible problem solver and is great working with people, building the relationships that are so vital to success. He's extremely positive, operates at the highest level of integrity and is very fair. He has

great values and he also has a great work ethic. We challenge each other and push each other to do more."

Despite Michigan's still-gloomy economy, Carlson and Lobdell are optimistic about pushing forward.

"This will be the best year we've ever had," predicts Carlson. "Northern United has added 200 employees in the last year in a half. Sales are up in 2011. We're located in two of the best cities in Michigan – Ann Arbor and Traverse City. We still have a ton of work to do, but we see Michigan having a great year." BN

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