

Behind the Menus

JON CARLSON AND GREG LOBDELL

It was on a 1996 trip out West that Jon Carlson and Greg Lobdell – best friends since kindergarten at Traverse City's Old Mission Elementary School – decided to go into business together.

That partnership today comprises restaurants and breweries in Traverse City, Royal Oak, and Ann Arbor. The five northern ventures include Mission Table (formerly Bowers Harbor Inn), North Peak Brewing Company, Kilkeny's Irish Public House, Blue Tractor, and Jolly Pumpkin.

What should people know about your restaurants?

[Jon Carlson] I think it is important to know that they are all individual owned with different operating partners onsite. There is no big umbrella company owning these. Greg and I are the main owners of all of them. We let each restaurant stand on its own and let the partner onsite and staff drive the concept.

Sure, we all meet and share ideas and save on purchasing and so on, but we work so hard to keep them unique and independent – that's key!

Any challenges?

I think the biggest challenge is facing new and exciting competition. We actually love the new places and strive to continually improve. We put a lot of money back in every three years both with interior, staff, and concept changes.

What is your diner profile here versus downstate?

No real difference. Royal Oak, Ann Arbor, and Traverse City all have very educated customers. They all want great food and great service! The only difference is Traverse City still gets a ton of new customers during the summer so you need to be ready.

Do you think the "foodie" label for this area is accurate?

Oh, yeah. It is crazy up here now. Great chefs are choosing Northern Michigan now to live and work. We love it. Our partner, Paul Olson, at Mission Table and Jolly Pumpkin, moved back to Michigan after living in NYC and Connecticut. Although he grew up downstate Michigan, he chose to come to Traverse City. What a prize for us to get such a talent as a partner and chef!

What's next?

Kilkeny's just went through a big update on interior and drink/food menu and we still have more work to do there before summer. North Peak was done last spring. Blue Tractor is getting a new remodel and new menu and some more smokers. [Blue Tractor] has continuously grown 15 percent each year for the last three years and we are adding a new seating, new bar, and possibly new rooftop deck. To handle this, we have to add more equipment for bbqing!

Any favorite restaurants?

Well, I have always been a big fan of Omelette Shoppe. I also really like Towne Plaza.

We always have our holiday party there – they are talented. Of course, I still love Sleders and Mode's!

What is your vision for your dream restaurant?

Ha! Living the dream – always wanted the three places we own now. Of course, growing up on Old Mission, it was amazing to have a place out there. It's very difficult to make any money out there ever but it is magical being on Bowers Harbor and so crazy to have our childhood friends owning wineries out there as well.

We grew up with the Kroupas and Stegengas and love what they do, plus we are kinda partial to 2Lads and Brys [vineyards.] Man, are we lucky! Wouldn't it be cool to have a Korean restaurant up there someday? Love Korean food!

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