Jeff Tobin, left, Kathy Tobin and Matt Shuman are the new owners of Big River Restaurant. The three say they want to make the downtown Corvallis restaurant more accessible to area residents while maintaining its reputation for high-quality food made with fresh, local ingredients.

Andy Cripe, Mid-Valley Media
How do you go about making changes to an iconic local restaurant?

Very carefully.

That’s the approach being taken by the new owners of Big River, a mainstay of the downtown Corvallis dining scene since it opened in 1995.

The upscale riverfront eatery at 101 NW Jackson Ave. was purchased on June 1 for an undisclosed amount by Jeff and Kathy Tobin, the owners of Mazama Brewing, in partnership with Matt Shuman, an electrical engineering instructor at Oregon State University.

The purchase includes 101 Eat & Drink, the bar that adjoins the restaurant, but not Big River Breads. The commercial baking operation will remain under the control of Brant and Carol Pollard, the restaurant’s longtime owners.

While a number of changes are in the works, Big River’s new owners say they’re taking their time about implementing them because they don’t want to undercut the restaurant’s highly successful formula.

“We’re still figuring out how to mesh the new concepts with what’s there right now,” Kathy Tobin said.

“We don’t want to lose what Big River is now.”
Helping them maintain that continuity will be a veteran staff, some of whom have been with the restaurant for 20 years or more. General manager Kyle Davis has moved on, but most of Big River’s 50 or so employees are sticking around, including chef Jesus “Chino” Mendoza, pastry chef Natalia Zakharenkova and bartender Josh Schep.

Over nearly a quarter-century of existence, Big River has built a rock-solid reputation for fine food and quality service. The menu is Northwest eclectic, featuring steak, seafood, pasta dishes and pizzas all showcasing a variety of fresh, local ingredients, as well as a formidable dessert lineup.

Those foundational elements aren’t going anywhere, the new owners promise.

What they do want to change is the perception that Big River is only for people who have big bucks to spend. To that end, they’re looking at ways to bring down the menu prices, possibly by paring down portion sizes.

“We want you to be able to come in and have an appetizer, an entrée and a dessert without busting your gut,” Shuman said.

“And without busting your pocketbook,” Jeff Tobin added.

For mid-valley residents of modest means, Big River has taken on an image of exclusivity, a perception the new owners want to turn around.

“Everyone’s been here, but it’s usually been to celebrate some kind of special occasion,” Kathy Tobin said. “We want to make it so people want to come here every day and celebrate life.”

Also in the works is a remodeling project to update the look of the restaurant.

And, of course, Mazama Brewing will have a prominent place in the operation.

The Tobins’ five-year-old brewery, located about two miles east of Corvallis at 33930 Eastgate Circle, has built a loyal following for its Belgian- and German-style brews, which are distributed from Northern California to the Canadian border and as far east as
Boise. The company also has accounts in Japan and Norway and is expanding into new markets in the Rocky Mountain region.

Closer to home, however, its offerings are not necessarily as well-known as some other Oregon craft beers, and the restaurant acquisition provides an opportunity to raise Mazama’s profile.

In addition to adding Mazama beers to the lineup at Big River’s Bow Truss Bar and 101, head brewer Jeff Tobin is working up a set of food pairing recommendations for the restaurant’s revamped menu and hopes to stage a series of brewer’s dinners.

Over the next 12 to 18 months, Tobin plans to install a three- to five-barrel brewing system on site.

“What that will allow us to do is offer some specialty beers that don’t fit the scale of the production brewery,” he said.

“We can also do a barrel-aging program here, do cellaring on site.”

In the near term, however, the most notable change is likely to be the one to the sign out front. In September, the new owners are planning a grand reopening of the restaurant under a new name: Mazama Brewing at Big River.

Like everything else happening at Big River, the new name is intended to strike a delicate balance between tradition and innovation.
As Kathy Tobin explains it, the idea is to send a twofold message:

“To our existing customers, things aren’t going to change that much — they’ll get better,” she said.

“And to people who may have only eaten here once, give us another shot in couple months, after we’ve made our changes.”

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