

The Black Bass Hotel is open for business

Curt Yeske

When Jack Thompson bought the shuttered Black Bass at auction in March 2008, he pledged to restore the 264-year-old inn and in the process revive a landmark synonymous with the picturesque village of Lumberville.

Judging by the oohs and aahs of many guests at a preview Thompson hosted before its grand opening on Sunday, the Doylestown auto dealer has gone beyond his pledge, prompting more than one observer to describe it as “the jewel of the Delaware.”

From the rooms on the top floor that have been converted into eight elegant suites, to the first floor dining area and its connected outdoor deck overlooking the Delaware River, Thompson and his family missed no nook or corner in the renovation project.

“One of the best reactions came from one of our wait staff who when she saw what has been done said, ‘It’s still the Black Bass but so much more and so much better,’” said Thompson’s daughter, Laura Thompson Barnes.

Patrons will find the familiar at the same but every aspect of the inn has a new sheen, emitting a sense of grandeur, warmth and class. Thompson credits Laura with handling much of the restoration of the furnishings, artwork and period pieces.

“There were about 500 antiques that needed work or restoring and 150 paintings that had to be restored,” said Thompson-Barnes. “We kept the restoration industry very busy. We even restored the pewter bar that originally came from Maxim’s in Paris.”

Most of the art works and other decorative items were collected by Herbert Ward, an avid Anglophile and once prominent New York



The Black Bass Hotel’s dining roo view.

City restaurateur who owned the Black Bass for decades until his death about eight years ago.

Thompson-Barnes’ favorite space is the Lantern Lounge, catching its name for a plethora of period restored lanterns that light the room with art-covered walls where patrons can chat while enjoying their favorite beverage alongside the oversized fireplace.

Restaurant patrons will dine on new table tops with their old bases, which are the black metal frames from former Singer sewing machines. Dining on the lower new outdoor deck or at the indoor facilities on the first and second floors provides uncluttered views of the Delaware River and the endless woods on the New Jersey side.

Thompson kept busy during an open house, greeting what seemed like all 200 residents of Lumberville and VIPs from other riverside communities. During a break

he was asked if he had totaled the costs of the renovation.

“I have absolutely no idea how much it has cost. I do believe, however, that it is at least twice as much as I paid for the property.”

That could conceivably place the total cost at more than \$3 million. Rather than confirm any figures Thompson smiled and said, “Go ask my contractor,” who also declined to provide a specific figure.

Lumberville residents and Bucks County business leaders have praised Thompson for taking on such a high-profile project with so many unknowns.

Bruce Katsiff, head of the Michener Museum in Doylestown, was one of the people whose home was invaded by each of the three river floods and has since moved elsewhere.

“This was a remarkable act of generosity of the Jack Thompson family to make this investment in Lumberville. It is private capitalism at its best,” Katsiff said.

The town takes its name from a sawmill operation that started there in 1785. The Tinsman family took over the sawmill operation in 1869 and own a construction supply business, the other major business in the village.

Family member William E. Tinsman said, “I’m ecstatic about what Jack Thompson has done. You can’t overestimate how grateful my family and the Lumberville community are for how he went about the restoration.

“It is something that will affect all of the communities up and down the river. The Thompsons have been very generous to Lumberville and every river community in the area.”

Grant Ross, who bid against Thompson for the inn and is now the general manager, said, “Jack

Thompson has been a one-man economic stimulus for Lumberville in this restoration of the Black Bass and with the Lumberville General Store.”

Old and new patrons are expected from far and near when they learn the arduous restoration is completed.

They will be dining from what Chef John Barrett calls his “international eclectic menu,” that he developed after reading the old inn’s diary of hometowns of guests who visited during the former ownership.

He said visitors from Japan, Great Britain, the West Coast and the South dined at the inn. “Being on the river and seeing where our customers were from made me go a little heavy on the fish side,” said Barrett who started his career at the old Bellevue Stratford Hotel followed by 12 years at Café Nola, both in Philadelphia.

His dinner menu ranges from \$20.95 for homemade roasted red beet ravioli to \$39.95 for a grilled dry aged New York Strip Steak. There is also a lower-priced bar menu available for more casual diners.

Rooms that once accommodated crews who built the Delaware Canal or manned its barges have been converted into eight upscale suites. Most have a commanding view of the river. The view from the “Suite Lorraine,” named for Thompson’s wife, is stunning, taking in the water and tree-lined vista along with the charming footbridge to Bulls Island.

One suite is named for President Grover Cleveland, an ardent fisherman who once stayed at the inn. All suites have expansive bathrooms. Suite rentals range from \$195 to \$395 on weekends, less on weekdays.