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JULY 7, 2015

Lewiston native and husband purchase Cook's Lobster House in Harpswell



PHOTO / COURTESY OF COOK'S LOBSTER HOUSE

Cook's Lobster House on Bailey Island in Harpswell, seen in the far right of this aerial photo.



ENLARGE IMAGE

PHOTO / COURTESY OF COOK'S LOBSTER HOUSE

Jennifer Dube Charboneau and Nick Charboneau with their two children in front of the sign for Cook's Lobster House.

BY DYLAN MARTIN

A Lewiston native is getting her long-awaited Maine homecoming, and it's happening through the purchase of an iconic restaurant: Cook's Lobster House in Harpswell.

Jennifer Dube Charboneau and her husband, Nick, purchased the 5,320-square-foot restaurant, just over the Cribstone Bridge on Bailey Island, for \$1.25 million. They bought it under the company name Cook's Real Estate LLC from Norman Curtis Parent, the restaurant's second owner. The deal closed June 30, and it was brokered by John Doyon of Malone Commercial Brokers, which had been marketing the property for several months.

The deal was made possible by a combination of the Charboneau's own equity and financing from the U.S. Small Business Administration, Androscoggin Bank and

a local investor, who Charboneau declined to name but said that he went to college with Nick.

Charboneau, who grew up in Lewiston, told MaineBiz on Monday that she and Nick plan to change

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the restaurant's name to "Cook's Lobster & Ale House." The name change represents the married couple's desire to maintain some of the restaurant's traditions while making some changes in an effort to rejuvenate the restaurant's business, which had been waning in the past few years.

"This community loves Cook's Lobster House. It's a part of their history," Charboneau said of the 60-year-old restaurant. "... We came in thinking our changes will still have a lot of the same charm but more modern — but we realized a lot of people love it the way it is."

The two largest planned changes include an expansion of the restaurant's outdoor deck and the build-out of a full bar that will put an emphasis on the growing popularity of craft beer, Charboneau said. But because of a busy season this year, she added, those additions likely won't be ready until next year. Other planned changes include a paint job for the building's exterior, new flooring and other renovations. The Charboneaus are also planning to make some changes to the menu and pricing.

But it's not just the building that will see changes: the business model is getting some tweaks too. Charboneau said she is planning to use her expertise in event and conference planning to market Cook's Lobster House as a destination for events of all kinds, promoting the restaurant's dining rooms, outdoor deck and picturesque surroundings as the main draw.

"It's the quintessential Maine experience people look for," Charboneau said.

Charboneau said the story of how she and her husband ended up buying the restaurant is a bit of a long story, but it goes like this: Charboneau moves to Vermont for college, meets Nick and settles down with him there to start a family; after running Mexicali Grill & Cantina in Williston, a town southeast of Burlington, for 15 years, Charboneau's wish to move back to Maine is met with one stipulation from Nick — to buy a new restaurant in Maine that they can call their new home.

Charboneau said she and Nick were at first nervous about prospects of becoming the new owners of a beloved restaurant in a tight-knit community. But, she said, they very quickly learned about how supportful Harpswell's community is, with locals coming in to say hi and restaurant staff showing renewed energy. A lady even came in once and offered to babysit the Charboneau's children.

"We've been humbled by the love and support we receive from this community," Charboneau said. "Total strangers have come up and thanked us, saying they're glad someone's here to bring this place back to life."

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