Food & Lifestyle

Inside the Brown's Brewing Co. multimillion-dollar plan to expand after 30 years in business

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TOAST OF THE HUDSON
Image: Albany Business Review

The Brown family recently bought back the restaurant and brewery's two buildings on River Street in Troy.

DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS | ALBANY BUSINESS REVIEW

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Hours before 500 people were expected to show up to celebrate Brown's Brewing Co.'s 30th anniversary last month, Garry Brown was on the roof of Revolution Hall.

The heat had gone out in his buildings on River Street in Troy, an ice storm was coming, the maintenance guy wasn't answering, and the service company was charging overtime for a weekend visit.

Brown got to work doing what he's done for the last three decades, fixing up the 170-year-old buildings he's been a steward of since the early 1990s, and got the heat working again.

After coming down from the roof, Brown was greeted by a longtime customer.

"Jim Sigsworth comes in every Saturday, sits at the bar. He's been here since day one," Brown said. "He's 80 years old and he was my parents paperboy back in the 1950s when he was a kid."

"Seeing him just took all that stress off me, after climbing up on the roof with a tool belt, and everything else," Brown added. "I said, 'That's why I'm here. We got the heat on for you, Jim.'"

After 30 years of brewing beer and serving food at its taproom on River Street in Troy – and more than a decade hosting weddings and other events at Revolution Hall – Brown's Brewing Co. is looking to the future.

The family has invested $3.7 million to buy back the 1800s buildings on the shores of the Hudson in Troy from their longtime investors, with plans to renovate the taproom and restaurant, add to the events space, and update the outdoor deck. At the same time, the Browns' daughters, Abby and Nora, have joined the business full time with eyes on growth.

Garry Brown and his wife, Kelly Brown, could not have imagined where the business would be today back when they were 20-somethings fixing up the buildings in Troy for the first time. Through determination, the business has survived recessions, partners exiting, the craft beer boom, the pandemic and the ups and downs of the city of Troy.

It's a story about buildings, about family, and yes, about beer.

Image: Albany Business Review

From left, Nora, Garry, Kelly and Abigail Brown.
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Plans to expand

Just before the end of 2022, the Browns closed on the purchase of two buildings at 417 and 419 River Street in Troy – the longtime homes of their Troy taproom and the private event space Revolution Hall.

The Browns had originally bought the buildings in 1990 and 1994, renovated them, opened the brewpub and then a concert hall, now the event space. In 2006, the Browns sold the buildings to New York City investors to help finance a production facility in North Hoosick. At the time, Brown's was only occupying 15% of the buildings on River Street.

Seventeen years later, the business has grown and occupies much more of the buildings, with the additions of the private event space, The Malt Room, and The Nest, a bridal suite rental. The business brews 3,000 gallons of beer a year between Troy and the brewery operations in North Hoosick at the Walloomsac taproom,and the restaurant bakes about 1,000 oatmeal stout beer pretzels a week.

The Browns were ready to invest more into the space, and the Manhattan couple offered the buildings up for sale at a price, which Brown negotiated down.

"We couldn't walk," Garry Brown said. "I can only tolerate one landlord and that was him."

Pioneer provided $2.4 million in financing toward the $3.7 million repurchase. The bank also helped finance the North Hoosick production facility and Walloomsac taproom.

"It just it made sense for us. I know what we're in for with the buildings. I know them intimately," Garry Brown said. "The girls [Abby and Nora] are taking the load off from us and running the businesses. So I can focus again on the development of these buildings."

Renovation plans include updating the brewpub space, rebuilding the brewery area and bringing in new equipment, building a new outdoor deck that overlooks the Hudson River, and combining the two kitchens – one that serves the events and one for the restaurants – into one.

The big stumbling block in redeveloping old buildings in Troy is improving access to the higher floors of the buildings with elevators and stair towers and sprinkler systems that meet modern code standards.

There's also potential to turn the upper floors of 425 River Street, which are currently undeveloped, into overnight rentals for wedding guests.

"The plans are grand when you think about it, because we don't want to make a mistake on the first floor that will prohibit us from developing the upper floors later on down the line," Garry Brown said. "It's important to get this right the second time around."

The Browns are working with Goldstone Architecture based in Bennington, Vermont, on the renovations for the space. They don't have estimates quite yet of how much the project will cost in total. Brown, like he always has done, plans to do a chunk of the work himself.

"We'll do it like we've done everything else," Garry Brown said. "We'll do it over time, as cash flow permits."

Image: Albany Business Review

Brown's Brewing Co.'s Walloomsac taproom in North Hoosick.
DONNA ABBOTT VLAHOS

Surviving the pandemic

Three years ago, in March 2020, the future of Brown's was less certain.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo had ordered all restaurants and bars to close indoor dining and go takeout only to stop the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Brown's quickly shifted to doing takeout and delivery for the first time, with the family handling the orders themselves along with a small team of employees.

"People flooded in. They purchased gift cards that they wouldn't use for years. They just wanted us to make it," Kelly Brown said. "A lot of our our friends, fellow restaurateurs didn't make it. And it was a very emotional time. But really, there was something to be said during that time that it brought us all together."

Abby Brown, 25, had graduated from the University of Vermont in 2019 and had been working in the business full time at this point, but Nora, 23, was still studying at UVM. They each got to know the restaurant side of the business better working long nights.

"We were doing delivery, it was just me here, and one popped up for Schenectady. My mom said, 'You're going to drive 30 or 40 minutes to make that delivery. We'll go anywhere,'" Nora Brown said. "We definitely extended ourselves. Everyone was doing things they didn't normally do at that time."

Kelly Brown used the time to perfect kitchen operations and hone in on little details that set Brown's Brewing apart, such as how the fire-roasted wings were packaged in the compostable takeout containers, each adorned with a rainbow-colored Brown's sticker.

"It was weird to me. After 30 years, with this place bustling seven days a week, to be in here Friday, Saturday nights and the place was just dark. We'd all finish up at 8 p.m. and our team would have a beer together at the end of the night and talk about the night. But we'd be sitting at different booths to be socially distanced from one another. It was really surreal looking back at it, but it was our reality at the time."

Image: Albany Business Review

Nora Brown on the early part of the pandemic: "We definitely extended ourselves. Everyone was doing things they didn't normally do at that time."

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Working during the pandemic brought the family of five (youngest daughter Mageean is a mechanical engineering major at Brown University) closer together. It helped Abby and Nora fall in love with the city of Troy, and the business.

"Coming down to Troy when the pandemic started, we had to just reduce our workforce by so much that we all had so many late nights here. ... it really just reinvested our love for this place," Abby Brown said. "That helped us realize that we wanted to pursue the growth of the restaurant, and invest in these buildings and this location."

'Nothing to lose'

Kelly Brown was about Nora's age and Garry was 29 when they first bought 417 River Street on the banks of the Hudson River in 1990.

The industrial decline of Troy was well underway, most of the textile mills had closed and the block just north of the Green Island Bridge lacked the restaurants, bars, apartments and vitality it has today. The Browns were pioneers, one of the first to do the now trendy thing of buying up an old factory and renovating it into a brewpub. In 1993, when the restaurant opened, it was one of the only places to grab a meal and a drink with views of the Hudson River.

"We didn't know we couldn't do it, so we just kept doing it," Garry said.

"We had nothing to lose," Kelly Brown added. "Well, Garry will say, 'Oh, I think we probably did have something to lose.'"

Kelly was a flight attendant working for American Eagle and Garry was a photojournalist, working for the Daily Gazette. Garry kept working during the three years it took to renovate the building. He switched his shift at the paper to 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. so he could work construction during the day.

They lived in a small apartment in Schenectady and had an old Ford pickup truck they'd drive to travel back and forth.

Image: Albany Business Review

Garry and Kelly Brown opened Brown's in 1993.

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"I was one of the first in this building with a big garbage bag, picking up pigeon poo," Kelly Brown said.

"The day before we opened – which would have been 30 years this past Sunday, Feb. 26, – we took off our our work boots and put on our shiny shoes and threw open our doors. And for the grace of God, it worked," she added. "We were not restaurateurs, so that part we learned along the way. But, our saving grace was always that our beer was spectacular."

Thirty years later, the future of Brown's Brewing Co. is secured for the next generation.

Abby is in charge or the bookkeeping, payroll and back office administration. Nora recently stepped into running the private events business, coordinating more than 60 annual weddings and countless other events that take place between Revolution Hall, the Malt Room and Brown's Brewing Co.'s other spaces.

Both Abby and Nora have moved to downtown Troy to be able to walk to work, and have a vision of where they'd like to see the business grow as the city grows and redevelops around them.

"Not every day is the same, and certainly not every day is easy. We've had incredibly difficult times and really stressful nights, but it's so rewarding," Abby Brown said. "I can't tell you how many times I've met people that are much older than me who've told me amazing stories about things that happened to them in their life here at Brown's. ... It just really makes me feel good about what we do here, that we can be that place for people that want to come here and spend time here. That's the best part."

Did the Browns ever think they would be here, 30 years later, still serving craft beer and ready to take on another renovation?

“I don't know if I ever thought that way. Years have gone by in the blink of an eye,” Garry Brown said. “It's the best job I could have hoped for. Every day is unique. And to be working with my daughters on a professional level is amazing, and oftentimes if I'm wrong in this situation, my daughters will correct me.”

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