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J. Anthony's Italian Grill reinvents itself: "Anything Worth Doing is Worth Overdoing"

By Janet Stoica

Changes are coming to J. Anthony's Italian Grill in Auburn and the area's social scene is about to change in a big way.

This restaurant is unique in that its property lines lie in two towns, Auburn and Oxford. The main bar area is situated in the town of Auburn, but the main dining area is situated in Oxford.

The Villatico family has two liquor licenses, one for each town. Now, however, those who want to enjoy a few cocktails in a new bar atmosphere have an added opportunity.

The transformation of the Oxford dining room section will now include a stunning bar area for the ultimate in socializing. "There will be an updated menu," said Jason Villatico, owner of J. Anthony's. "We'll still have many of our customer favorites, but we'll also offer new vegan dishes along with salad combinations of steak tips, salmon, or fruit." He noted that the appetizer menu has added a lot more flat breads.

"We still have a made-from-scratch kitchen," he said. "When our homemade lasagna is finished, we expect to get 16 pieces per pan and it must be 6-7 inches high, if it doesn't meet our standards, it's just not acceptable. If you order our chicken parmesan, we know you'll have enough leftover to take it home for another meal. You gain customers for a lifetime with servings like ours."

Villatico talks more about the changes. "Our latest renovations are going to be a great way to start the post-COVID era. I can't thank our customers enough. They stayed with us through all the continuous changes the state made over the past year. It's been a year that will not be forgotten.

"We had to pivot and change our business model," he said. "The entire restaurant will become a lounge and sports bar atmosphere."

COVID did leave its mark on the restaurant. "COVID has changed our business forever," he said. "Ordering online and expediting our food preparation has become our new operational standard. Beginning in March 2020 we had to shut down our restaurant as we were set up to do bulk food preparation only. It was a 130-day shutdown. I honestly thought we were going to lose. We kept a grip on the situation though and just kept adapting. In the beginning of the shutdown, there was no revenue coming in but all our costs still had to be paid for. First we had a tent for outdoor dining only, then the state changed the guidelines to 90-minute dining times and capacity restrictions. Following this, patrons could not just have an alcoholic beverage but had to order food. With all these continuous changes, we were still running at the state guidelines of only 50% capacity."

"Help wanted" signs are visible throughout the region. J. Anthony's has weathered the hiring aspect very well. "Thank goodness all of our staff still wanted to come back, Villatico said. "We are almost back up to our usual 50-employee staff and operations are running very well."

He reflects on the COVID misery again. "We never thought



Jason Villatico and Gina Vilatico, owner.



COVID would last this long. Our toughest time was during the November elections; people were nervous over who our next President would be. There was a fear of the election results and then COVID became worse. The holidays are when the restaurant business does well but business dropped even more in January and February. Only six people were allowed at each table and with the six-foot distancing requirement, it was difficult to handle."

How did he get through it? "My weekly routine began every Monday morning where I would analyze all of our business activities from the previous week. I found I had to be very much hands-on. For the first time in 40 years here, it was make-or-break time. I grew up in this business. I began as a dishwasher and then a fryer cooker. Our great culinary team is the same as pre-COVID. My kitchen was our strongest asset. The entire staff was eager to get back to work. We ensured that every employee here is COVID-certified through online courses. I had questions daily and I spoke with the Auburn and Oxford Boards of Health constantly about the

guidelines we should be following. Both Boards helped immensely. They were challenged with the constant guideline changes too, but it made us all stronger and better."

He continues: "I sat down with multiple local restaurant owners to review strategies for our businesses, and we all worked together. As the Massachusetts' rules changed, we changed too, and we all helped each other. We have become much more structured in how all of our restaurant functions are accomplished. There are four managers here and they handle the business well."

Still, there are challenges ahead. "We now find ourselves adjusting for hyper-inflation from the hacking in the beef market to all other vendor pricing. We know our customer demographics and we do really care about our patrons. We know our customers very well and feel that we will have to adapt our costs to survive. We have a whole new appreciation for our loyal customers. The support from our local community has been and is truly overwhelming. We simply cannot thank our patrons enough! Our customers have entered our doors and have supported us so much. They have shown their appreciation to our entire wait staff by their extra gratuities. Our staff has been so loyal too. We've always tried to be here for them. Our business location is in a prime spot."

On Monday, June 14, J. Anthony's began a complete renovation of its dining room section, with new paint and tile and state-of-the-art television monitors. There will be a new 26-seat bar to showcase a more social atmosphere. There will be high-table booths, high-table dining, and regular-height seating for diners. "We'll be bringing back acoustic in July," stated Jason, "it'll be a fun and welcoming atmosphere."

It was in 1981 that Jason's dad, Arnold Villatico, first opened the restaurant. "He operated this place for a very long time," said Jason, "and I have never met anyone more passionate about the restaurant business than my dad. He set up an entertainment area at the back of this place where many bands came to play. Following this, he enclosed the area and made a wedding venue and banquet facility. I've been operating J. Anthony's for six years and now, another transformation is being done to accommodate our patrons. We've learned there is more a demand for the social aspect these days. People come here to be with their friends. They want to see people again, they want to watch a game together. It's the camaraderie. People will enjoy themselves and relax together. 'Anything worth doing is worth overdoing.' "

J. Anthony's Italian Grill, 917 Southbridge Street, Auburn. Phone: (508) 832-9705. Open Mon-Thursday 4 p.m. – closing; Fri-Sunday 11:30 a.m. – closing. www.janthonysg Grill.com

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Precious Ones expands by purchasing Cherub's Haven in Northbridge



Jeff May (owner of Precious Ones) and Terri LaRoche (owner of Cherub's Haven) have been discussing the potential acquisition for the past five years and now it is coming to fruition.

Jeff said he was "thrilled with the opportunity to serve more families in the Blackstone Valley and buying his "competitor" was just what he needed to expand Precious Ones.

When asked about her feelings in selling, Terri said, "It is my baby, having started it in my Grandfather's building (originally a hardware store) and it is certainly difficult to let it go." However, she is thrilled with the thought of retiring and spending more time with her husband and family.

She went on to say that "Cherub's could not be in more capable hands, and I am confident that Jeff will run Cherub's Haven with the same enthusiasm and love that he does Precious Ones.

Jeff's response was nothing but respect and admiration for Terri and what she has accomplished, by saying "Terri should be incredibly proud of 40 years of hard work through many challenging times; she's done a tremendous service to the families in this community."

Both owners agreed they have a strong mutual respect (and recent friendship) with one another.

Precious Ones currently offers infant, toddler and preschool care at its main facility in Uxbridge and separate school age locations in both Uxbridge and Douglas. The recent purchase will include the two main buildings in Whitinsville (serving infants, toddlers, preschool, and school age) and additional school age locations in Northbridge and Grafton.

On the growth and expansion of Precious Ones, Jeff said "I'm just working hard one day at a time and I never dreamed it would grow to this level when I started Precious Ones back in 2011."

Jeff spoke of the high demand for quality childcare in this area and the tremendous team he is blessed with at Precious Ones. He offered "we are incredibly grateful for God's blessing on Precious Ones, and we look forward to being able to meet the childcare, preschool and school age needs of the families in the communities that we serve."



Jeff May (owner of Precious Ones) and Terri LaRoche (owner of Cherub's Haven) shake hands marking their business agreement.

When asked what message they both would like to give to families in the Blackstone Valley Terri said, "thank you for the privilege to love, teach and care for your children for all 40+ years," and Jeff said, "it all stems from a genuine love for children; they are created in God's image and Precious in His sight."

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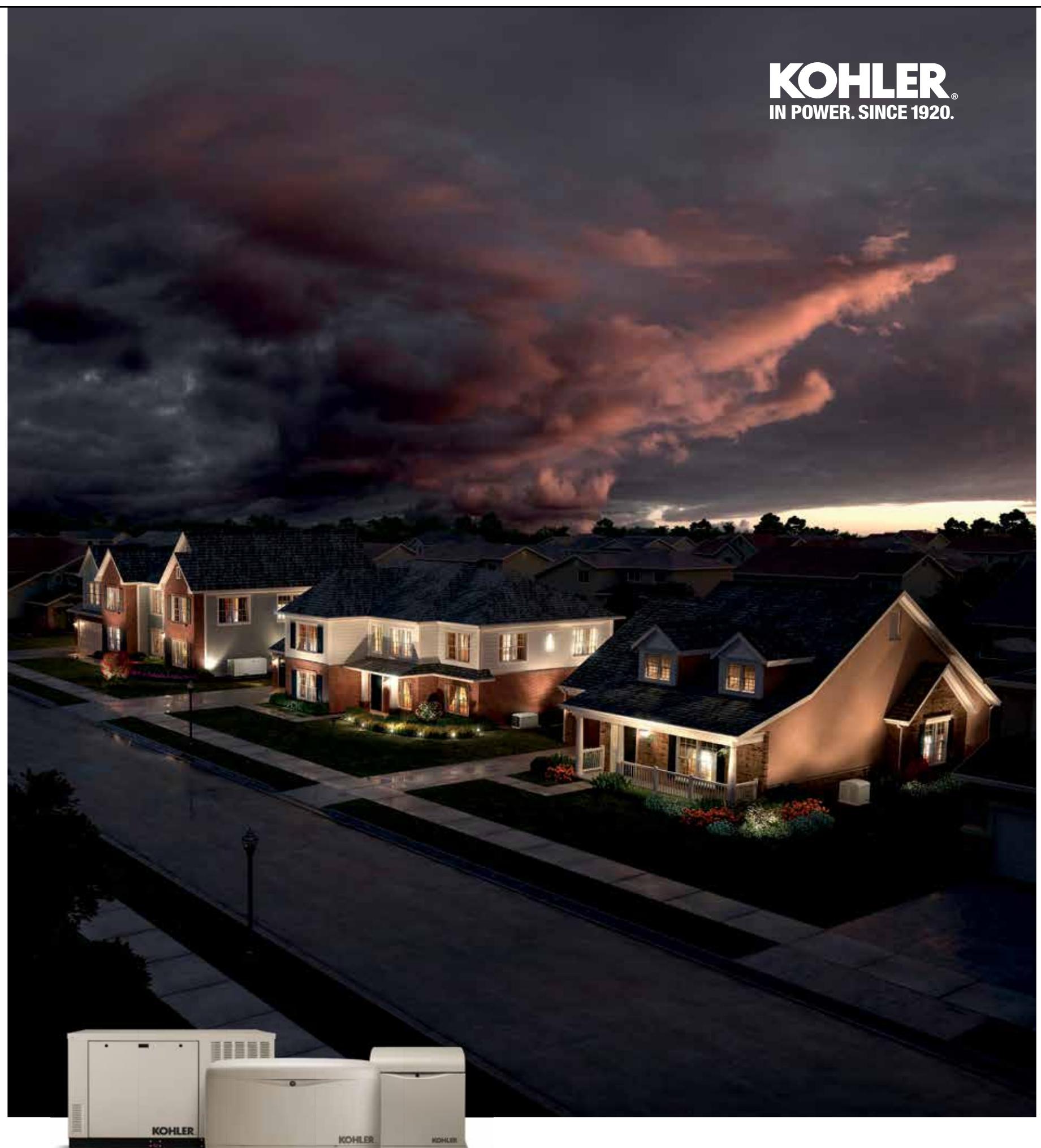
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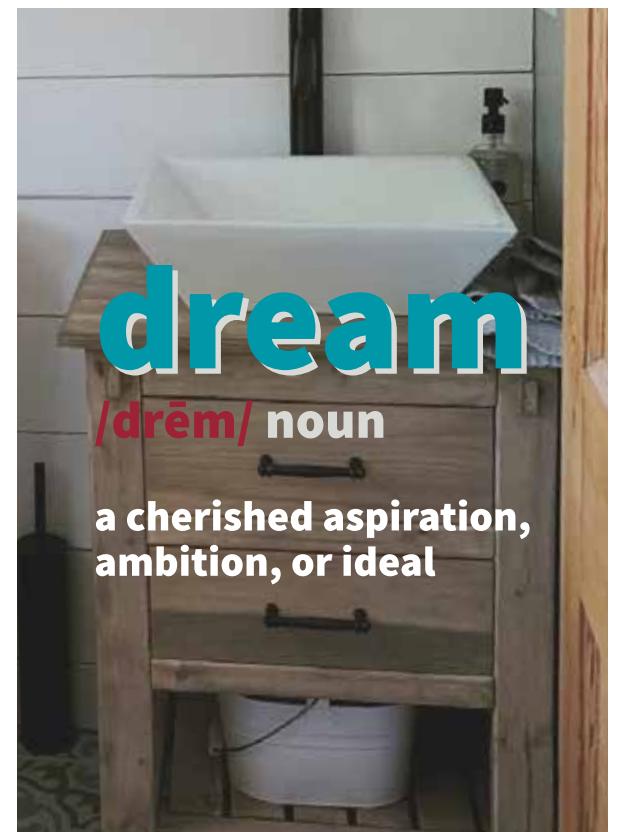
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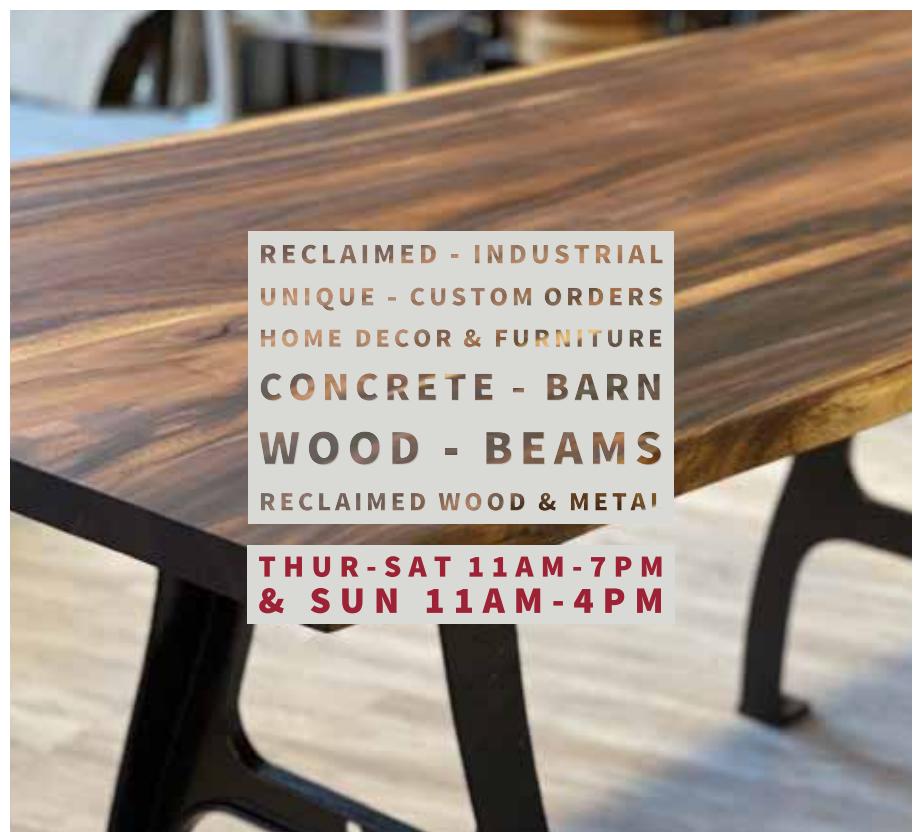
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