

Tapping Into the Tastes of the Region

Photo by David Gibb | dgibbphoto.com



Turning down the chance to operate the restaurant where Taprock Northwest Grill is located, part of a project developed by Oregon State Senator and banker Brady Adams, would haunt Dave Thomason, CEO of Thomason Hospitality Group, as he watched the impressive log building rise on the banks of the Rogue River. Fortunately, when the person chosen in his place dropped out at the eleventh hour, Thomason seized his second chance to oversee what would become one of the region's busiest restaurants.

Taprock is currently the centerpiece of Thomason's holdings, which include more than 40 stores throughout the state. Among them are multiple Pita Pit, Elmer's and Human Bean locations. All in all, Thomason employs around 600 people, and he says those employees are the key to his success. He believes that the Southern Oregon region is the ideal location for incoming enterprises looking for a great workforce and a better quality of life.

He and his wife are themselves transplants from Anaheim, California. They moved to Grants Pass when their oldest child was just three years old. Now, she works for Thomason as a regional store manager. The firm plans to expand its holdings across the board in the years to come and Thomason is currently laying the groundwork to franchise the Taprock Northwest Grill brand.

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*— Dave Thomason,
CEO of Thomason Hospitality Group*

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Nearly a decade ago, Dave Thomason passed up the greatest opportunity of his professional life. CEO of the Thomason Hospitality Group, which owns and operates more than 40 restaurants from Ashland to Beaverton, Thomason turned down former Oregon Senator and banker Brady Adam's invitation to operate what is now the Taprock Northwest Grill in Grants Pass, which Adams and Evergreen Bank was developing. It was a decision that would haunt Thomason over the ensuing months as the impressive lodge-style log building on the banks of the Rogue River took shape.

Fortunately, the career restaurateur got a second chance. At the eleventh hour, the person engaged to run the restaurant dropped out due to lack of funding, leaving the door wide open. This time, Thomason jumped at the opportunity, and Adams was equally pleased with the change of plan. Taprock Northwest Grill opened for business in May 2009 and has been the centerpiece of Thomason Hospitality Group's holdings ever since.

Although vacationers fill the 300-seat establishment to capacity during the tourist season, Thomason has taken care to make Taprock more than a seasonal eatery. "To be successful in a place like Taprock, you can't do it with the idea or attitude that summer is going to make us," he explains, "because that's three plus months of the year. What are you going to do the rest of the year? We consider ourselves a regional destination restaurant."

Originally from Southern California, Thomason and his wife moved to Grants Pass when their oldest child, Danae, was just three years old. Danae now acts as regional manager for the firm's Pita Pits and Human Bean stores, and her husband holds a district manager position. Thomason considers his work force of around 600 people statewide, along with his Vice President of Operations, Terry Hopkins, to be key in the success of his business.

"It's all about the people that you have, and we have a focus of finding the right people, rewarding them for what they do, and making them feel the incentive to stay and to work hard. We provide a lot of incentives for our employees to be successful," he said.

The CEO has also demonstrated his commitment to the hospitality industry in the state by actively participating in the Oregon Restaurant Association and championing those issues that directly benefit the industry at large. He has served on the ORA board for 18 years and at one time was the organization's president.

"I love what I do," says Thomason. Over the 40-some years he has been involved with food service, he and his wife have owned and operated a number of restaurant franchises, including Carl's Jr., Blimpie's and Kenny Rogers Roasters. Despite the many challenges he has had to contend with, from state-mandated pay raises to losing a store because of a highway project, Thomason has found the franchise model to be a good fit for his firm.

In fact, he plans to franchise the Taprock Northwest Grill himself in future years, marketing the innovative brand prototype to others who wish to tap into that success. He also plans to expand his other interests into new markets around the state.

"When you look at Southern Oregon, I think there's a lot of attraction and reasons to expand," says Thomason. He would like to see more big employers locate in the area, bolstering the local economy and attracting more visitors to the region. "The job market is terrific when it comes to the kinds of people that they need," he adds.

"We absolutely love being here," says the former Californian. "Overall, I've recommended this area to a number of people that are looking for something different. For us, it's been the perfect choice."



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The Caveman Bridge and Taprock Northwest Grill in Grants Pass.

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