

An institution in the heart of Old Chatham



By Siobhan Connolly

When Iggy and Dina Vardi purchased Jackson's Old Chatham House last year from the restaurant's fourth-generation owners, Barry and Leya Jackson, they knew what they were getting into, even if they didn't really know "the business." For instance, they knew if they didn't have Prime Rib at the top of the menu, they could be in hot water. "We've always said that we're not making any changes, but we'll make improvements. Prime rib will always be on the menu. We have no intention of getting run out of town," Iggy laughs. Now that they've had some time to get their bearings, we sat down with the Vardis to get a sense of how things are going.

How did you come to be in Columbia County?

"So, my wife's father has a farm about two miles down County Road 13. She's been coming up here for 40 years. I've been coming up here for about 35 or 36 years, since I met her. I've always known the area, but we were never really here full-time until last Labor Day.

Was Jackson's a restaurant that you frequented?

"We would come every now and then, but not that often. We'd come with my father-in-law when he was part of the [Old Chatham] Hunt. Or for the blessing of the hounds. I guess, probably later on, we came a few times. But yeah, we weren't, like, regulars here. But we knew the place. We knew its history... From what I understand, Cornelius Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt's grandfather, had a hardware store here. Roosevelt was a stagecoach stop for the stagecoach between Boston and Albany. But also, we knew the Jackson family opened the current establishment in 1943, and it has been in operation ever since. That seemed amazing.

What made you decide to take on a restaurant?

"I had never been in the industry before. It was just your typical story: I was in corporate America for 30 years, and it was fun, but then things started changing. I could just tell that, you know, the writing was on the wall. It wasn't fun anymore. And then just everything kind of aligned.

"We actually sat right here – me and my wife, and our two adult daughters – about a year before it came on the market. And I said, 'I'd love to own a place like this. It was a busy Saturday night, and I remember the exact table we were at. And one of my daughters says, 'Why don't you buy it, Dad?'

"I said, because families don't put places like this on the market. This is a third-, fourth-generation place. You don't find places like this on the market.

"And then a year later, literally, a year later, I'm hiking in the Catskills with, interesting enough, someone I met previously, who lives in Valatie, and my daughter called and says, 'Dad, I'm at Poppy's for the weekend, and I just saw a For Sale sign at Jackson's.

Iggy describes it as a "Wow" moment.

"I start looking into it. And now, here we are, a couple of years later, working harder than we've ever worked before and loving it. In the beginning, probably for the first six months, we were working seven days a week. But we take a little more time off these days. ... Now it's about six and a half days a week," he laughs.

"We have great people here that definitely make it a lot easier, especially coming in, not knowing the business. And it's very rewarding. You know, wake up in the morning, energetic, looking forward to coming to work. You know, people say, 'Oh my God, the restaurant business is so hard.' But I think everything's hard. I don't know what's not hard."

One Step (Ladder) at a time

"In the beginning, Iggy and Dina made a point to be visible in the community. They personally worked on refreshing the building's curb appeal, painting the exterior, and adding a few new plantings in the garden. They wanted to get to know the customers, but also, and most importantly, they wanted Jackson's patrons to get to know them.

"We painted the wall. We painted the fence. We did a lot of work ourselves in the beginning. And while we could have paid people to do it, I thought it was important to do it ourselves so we could really have skin in the game. It was important to let our customers, and our guests, know that we're doing this work because we didn't want to be absentee owners. We wanted them to know that we're all in. It's hard work, there are a lot of moving parts, but it's also been rewarding and fun. Every day brings a new surprise. Some endearing, some all-engrossing.

"As the owner of a restaurant, you really have to be the jack of all trades. Especially a place like this, because the building is so much older and it's been around for a while, and there is a lot that needs maintenance and repair. I've learned so much about our well,, so much about our electric, just all these crazy problems I never knew about are now mine to solve. I think the one thing that I really realized is that no matter how bad it gets, it's just a temporary moment in time. You fix it, and we move on.

"When we didn't have water a few weeks ago, I thought the well was dry. It wasn't. We had to shut down for a day on a Wednesday. The next day, Goold Wells came and checked the well, and said there's plenty of water. It turned out to be a piece of electronics on the well pump. He replaced the part, and Boom! Water within two minutes.

"At the moment it was happening it seemed like the world was ending. I'm saying, 'Oh, my God, my wife's gonna kill me. What did I do?' But I took a moment and realized it's just never as bad as it seems. So I think that's probably the thing that surprised me the most is the ability to realize the worst things don't necessarily come true. You just have to trudge through it, and in the end, it always works out."

Good Change

Customers have so far embraced the improvements acknowledging they've been closely to rustic feeling of Jackson's.

"We needed a new walkway into the restaurant because the tiles were cracked and dusty and we wanted to give guests a solid impression. And the banquet room floor was kind of bouncy, almost like a bounce house, so we ripped the floor up, replaced all the joists and struts and now it's a brand new floor that will last for another 200 years," said Iggy.

Regulars barely noticed other enhancements that include some new and refined table-tops, structural repairs, and kitchen upgrades. They updated the water system and installed a permanent generator after a storm knocked out power during the early days of their tenure.

"Irony has it, though, once you put a generator in, you never need it. But other people have lost power, and they come here. Barry and Leya, always told me that when we do lose power, we'll always be one of the first to come back online because the linemen need a place to eat while they work."

Iggy and Dina have other plans, too.

This winter they hope to replace the worn carpeting in the main dining room with a hardwood floor. They also want to refurbish the backside fireplace in the main dining room. Eventually, they plan to upgrade bathrooms. Although they will retain their hunting-dog charm labels: "Setters and Pointers."

A Community Hub

"We've met so many people who tell us, 'Oh, this is where I had my first job; or my first date, or my first kiss. I got married here, had my rehearsal dinner here, or my



confirmation here. I had this here, I had that here. So many people. And so many stories.

And that's when we realized that we were right in our decision to make improvements, but not changes, because this is really unlike so many other places. We have been to thousands of restaurants all over the world, all over the country, all over New York, all over the place. We've never been to a place where the guests have such a connection with it. Jackson's an institution.

I have customers who come in, literally, five days a week, same time, every day. Others come in two or three times a week for dinner, and it's really the center of Old Chatham.

But, more than its picturesque location, the restaurant is a community hub. It's not just the familiar chef and waitstaff, most of whom have stayed on; or the longstanding traditions, like their Saturday morning Bloody Mary Club; but also Jackson's Old Chatham House is one of the few banquet halls left in the county that has an operational restaurant and bar attached.

History and Family Forward

Just beyond the bar, there's a picture of Barry and Leya Jackson's grandparents. "That picture is the Jacksons' property, but they agreed to leave it with us as long as they feel comfortable. I know that once they want it back, I'll have to put a picture of my grandparents up there. People just love that story."

In fact, one of the things Iggy and Dina have changed is the "swag."

"On the back of our t-shirts it now says, 'Jackson's Everyone's First Something.' That's our new motto because although this building is almost 200 years old, and the business is nearly 80 years old, the people who come here also have a history with us."

The Chatham Press | October 2025 | Page 11