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64 43

63 42

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WE BRING THE VALLEY TO YOU

Mill Creek Road fixture Abeja sold

Separate owners will hold majority stakes in the property's winery and inn, with founders maintaining an active role.

By VICKI HILLHOUSE
of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Abeja, Walla Walla's renowned Mill Creek Road winery and its farmstead retreat on 38 acres, is under new ownership.

Founders Ken and Ginger Harrison have sold the majority interest in their winery and luxury country inn to two

ownership groups, according to an announcement.

The pair will retain "significant equity ownership" in the operations of the winery and will be actively involved in its oversight, the announcement said.

Their new partner in that venture includes Arnie Prentice of Seattle insurance brokerage and consulting firm USI Kibble & Prentice.

The Harrisons will also continue to participate in ownership of the The Inn through a separate limited liability corporation, The Inn at Abeja Vineyards LLC. Prentice, who counts himself among the longtime patrons of

the spot, is a partner in the LLC, along with John Oppenheimer, founder and CEO of Columbia Hospitality.

A combination of investors who represent Seattle-based Columbia Hospitality also recently acquired the Walla Walla Red Lion Inn & Suites, which they will open at an independent lodging destination.

With The Inn at Abeja, Columbia Hospitality will oversee management and operations on

behalf of the ownership acquiring the business.

Terms of the sales were not disclosed. Mergers and acquisitions firm Metis, an Exvere Company that has offices in Seattle, Walla Walla and the Willamette Valley, served as adviser for both transactions.

Winemakers Daniel Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler will continue to oversee winemaking operations. The Inn at Abeja will keep all on-site team members, including

innkeeper Mary Besbris.

Under the agreement, the winery will retain control of its estate vineyards and continue to produce its Heather Hill Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon and other limited release, estate-grown wines.

"Meticulous attention to detail from vine to cellar to bottle has always defined Abeja wines," Ken Harrison said in a prepared statement. "Separating operations of the winery and The Inn will allow us to sharpen our focus on the wines and continue our mission of delivering the highest

See REQUEST, Page A4

✓Request under consideration to allow expanded inn operation

Continued from Page A1
quality product."

Founded in 2000, Abeja is located on a historic farmstead off Mill Creek Road and surrounded by vistas, gardens, vineyards and creeks.

The operation has been the subject of consideration at the county level with a request to establish a new definition for a "Type III Winery." Under the proposal, the winery could provide overnight accommodations similar to a bed-and-breakfast inn.

Under the proposal, a Type III bed-and-breakfast could include, but not be limited to, a restaurant, catering facility, banquet and meeting rooms. It would

apply only to the Rural Residential Mill Creek 5 district.

Oppenheimer called the inn "the ideal addition to our expanding collection of unique properties."

"We look forward to building on the phenomenal experience Ken and Ginger have created, including hosting more events and weddings on this stunning property, and continuing to work with the on-site team to provide exceptional guest experiences at this local gem."

In both wine and accommodations, Abeja has become synonymous with painstaking detail and care.

"From the start our

vision has been to preserve, protect and share the peaceful, calming beauty of this incredible property through world-class hospitality," Ken Harrison said in the announcement. "John shares our unique vision, and Columbia Hospitality's standards of excellence are in keeping with our commitment to crafting exceptional wine and providing guests with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the tranquil allure of this pristine setting."

Columbia Hospitality, founded in 1995, includes in its portfolio the Salish Lodge and Spa, The Heathman Hotel Kirkland, and Friday Harbor House.