

Same hugs, new hands: The Grist sold, owners retire

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Every day, Rob Begin greeted guests at the Grist Craft Kitchen & Brewery with a hug — so many, he joked, if he didn't hug 60 per cent of them, he was doing something wrong.

After four years of pouring their hearts into the business, Rob and his wife, Danielle Begin, have decided to step away from the restaurant and brewery they built from the ground up.

Rob and Danielle's final day is Sunday, June 8 and the official takeover is the following Wednesday (the Grist is closed Monday and Tuesday).

Regulars don't need to worry — the heart of the Grist will stay the same, said Rob and the new owner, Mamdouh Abdelmaksoud.

Abdelmaksoud said he's keeping everything exactly the same, from the staff, beer and menu to the community-focused spirit Rob and Danielle made central to the Grist's success.

"My goal is to continue their vision," said Abdelmaksoud in an interview. "We're keeping everything running as-is."

"Why fix something that's not broken, right?"

Rob said letting go is bittersweet — but knowing the place they built will carry on unchanged makes it easier to step away.

Following years of long hours and little time for themselves, Rob said the decision came down to one thing: Reclaiming balance. "After four years, we're



Rob and Danielle Begin, left, their daughter Devin, second right, and new owner Mamdouh Abdelmaksoud gather outside The Grist with Luca, the restaurant's team mascot, marking the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. PAIGE SEBURN

still putting in 80 hours a week," he said. "We don't really have a life outside of this business — and so, it was time to sort of recapitulate that."

The Grist opened in July 2021 after the couple converted an old fruit packing house on Four Mile Creek Road into what quickly became a local hotspot.

Rob said it was a business built during a pandemic, against all odds.

"There was a tremendous amount of risk," said Rob. "The only way we were able to do this was to sell our house and use the funds from the house to be able to build out the restaurant."

Rob said he and Danielle realized their lives had become entirely wrapped up in the business. So, they wanted to start being more present for their children

and grandchildren.

He said he knew it was time to step away while things were still going well.

"Sometimes, you need to know when to leave on a high note — as opposed to continuing with less involvement," he said, adding that he didn't want to become a partial owner or simply cut back his hours.

A business needs fully hands-on owners to succeed, he said — anything less would have risked their reputation.

"You become like other owners that are sort of hands-off owners," Rob said.

The decision to retire wasn't easy, said Rob. But he and Danielle were determined to hand off the business in a way that wouldn't compromise what they'd built.

That's where Abdelmaksoud came in.

A customer of the Grist for the past year, Abdelmaksoud said he and the Begins gradually became friends.

"At least over a year as a steady customer of ours," said Rob.

Then, the couple started talking about thoughts of moving on.

"I became a customer, and then we became friends and then we just started talking informally about the restaurant and their goal to possibly move on and spend more time with their family," Abdelmaksoud said.

Abdelmaksoud, who has worked in the restaurant industry since 2017, is a part owner of Mick & Angelo's Eatery and Bar in Niagara Falls and has experience in food distribution and bank-

ing, said he knew it was the right opportunity at the right time.

"I think they wanted to leave it in the right hands," said Abdelmaksoud, a Niagara resident for more than 25 years who holds an MBA from York University and completed his undergraduate studies at Brock University.

"I like to be around our customers and I like to make them feel welcomed" — the same values he said the Begins carried from day one at the Grist.

For Rob, selling to an individual owner, not a corporation, was essential.

"Corporate people run their businesses differently," said Rob. "He believes in the business so much that he really wanted to be the new owner of it, so it was kind of a natural fit — because he sees the passion."

All current staff, including the Begins' daughter Devin Begin, will stay on.

"Devin is key to the transition because she's been here from the start," said Abdelmaksoud.

Devin opened the restaurant alongside Rob and Danielle in 2021 and will remain as a bartender and manager, to make sure the Grist keeps its same standard as a restaurant.

"I want to just make sure that everyone has the same experience that they had prior."

Devin said she stayed on because she trusts Abdelmaksoud to carry on the Grist's legacy.

"I wouldn't be staying if I didn't have the utmost faith that he was going to maintain what we have built."

Brooklyn, their other daughter, will continue helping with the Grist's social media, while Dan Lillo, their nephew, will continue waiting tables.

"A lot of the DNA that's already here I'm keeping," said Abdelmaksoud. "I think it's going to be a smooth transition."

Knowing the Grist would remain in the trusted hands of their staff made the decision easier, Begin said.

"This is their legacy now," said Begin. "I really wanted them to know that life for them wasn't going to change and that everything was going to be fine for them."

Abdelmaksoud officially takes over June 11, after a short transition period. He said he doesn't plan on bringing in new staff but may consider support staff or another manager down the line.

Rob and Danielle will step back entirely after the handover, but they'll stay in touch to support as needed, whether for menu development or simply offering advice, said Abdelmaksoud.

"They won't be in the restaurant, but there'll be a phone call away and they'll continue to support the success of the business."

Meanwhile, the couple is looking forward to their new full-time gig as private chef and nanny for their grandchildren — spending summers at their cottage about an hour away and winters in Los Angeles with the grandkids.

"The pay sucks — but the perks are priceless," Rob said with a chuckle.

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Restoration of next part of heritage trail to begin mid-June

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The next phase of the restoration of the Upper Canada Heritage Trail is underway, confirmed the town's heritage trail committee during its meeting late last month.

This latest effort involves work on the trail starting at Line 3, which will begin in mid-June, and will ultimately span four kilometres of gravel trail, ending at Line 8.

This step marks the latest phase of a project that started in 2017. It has looked to beautify and restore the trail that once

marked the old site of the Erie and Ontario railway line, which ran from 1854 to the mid-1950s and had since become an unmaintained trail.

Phase three of the project is estimated to cost \$400,000. The public will be able to give their input on how they want the trail to be made.

Committee members also concluded that phase two is now complete, which involved restoring two kilometres of the trail, extending from East/West to Line 3 along Concession 1.

The committee members were happy with the progress being made so far and said they believe that this

newest restoration effort will go smoothly.

"I would say we could cut the ribbon on phase two being done," said Kevin Turcotte, a committee member and the town's parks and recreation manager.

There were some potential concerns over the effects of the project, including archeological digs and trees obstructing the path. However, these concerns are not a problem, say committee members.

"I don't have any concerns because phase two was so successful," said Turcotte.

The first phase of trail construction, which is a trail line that goes from John Street to East/West

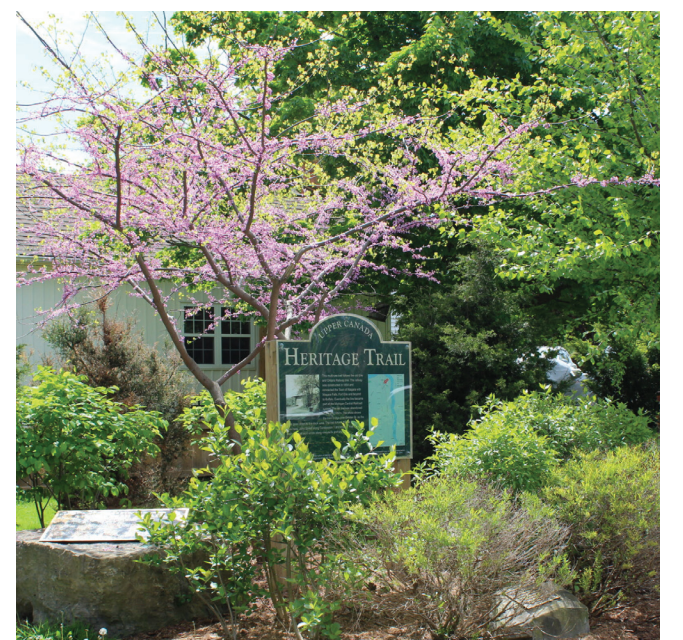
Line, was completed last year at a cost of \$118,000. The second phase was estimated to have cost \$100,000.

The project, which has been funded by the municipality as well as donations and sponsors, was slow to get started but has picked up in the last year. If successfully completed, the new trail will be 10 kilometres long.

The heritage trail committee meets again on June 18 at 1 p.m.

Any members of the public who wish to give their input on phase three can do so at jointheconversation-notl.org/heritage-trail.

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Work on the Upper Canada Heritage Trail between Line 3 and Line 4 is set to start mid-June. When completed, the restored trail will span 10 kilometres. DAN SMEENK