

New owners of Hullabaloo restaurant in Oldtown Salinas, Robert and Cristina Peterson.



# The art of the possible

*Hullabaloo's new owners  
have some big plans*

## HULLBALLOO

When Hullabaloo restaurant opened in Old-town Salinas eight years ago, it established a beach-head for the redevelopment effort that has since enlivened the reborn downtown.

But its original owners, Chef Todd Fisher and Will Reynolds, who ran the front of the house, have moved on and sold the enterprise to Robert Peterson, a 49-year-old San Diego businessman who's new to restaurant ownership but eager to meet the challenge.

"I'm excited about anything that has to do with food and gracious living," Peterson said. "I'm passionate about marketing Hullabaloo as Salinas' first destination for fine dining."

Four months ago, Peterson assumed ownership of Hullabaloo, which continues to bill its fare as "bold American cooking."

■ **OWNERS:** Robert and Cristina Peterson

■ **TYPE OF BUSINESS:** Restaurant

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 30

■ **ADDRESS:** 228 S. Main St., Salinas

■ **PHONE:** 757-3663

■ **ONLINE:** www.hullabaloo restaurant.com

Fisher, the founding chef, established a new company in March, Chef Todd Food Concepts, which holds the catering contract for the National Steinbeck Center.

Peterson said earlier this month he officially took over the restaurant Sept. 28.

### Seeking a new phase

Newly wed to his wife, Cristina, he said the couple was ready to embark on a new phase of their lives.

"Food (service) was my

first job in life," Peterson said. "I've always wanted to own a restaurant outright."

He declined to say what he paid for Hullabaloo, but said he financed the purchase with personal funds.

Having grown up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Peterson said, he has been living in San Diego for the past 25 years. An entrepreneur at heart, he has been running his company, Brooks Media Group, Unincorporated, since the early 1980s, he said. In 2005, he acquired Placer Auto Body in Sacramento. When he decided to buy a restaurant, he examined more than 1,000 businesses and visited at least 150 of them before deciding on Hullabaloo, he said.

"We feel it is the best restaurant in the Salinas area," Peterson said. "We thought as well that we can improve on that."

He said most of the restaurant's employees

have been retained, including the cooking staff originally hired by Fisher.

### New dishes in the works

Peterson said he intends to be a hands-on owner, and he and his wife are involved in every aspect of the business, from chatting with patrons at their tables to reorganizing the menu. Daily operations of his two other businesses have been handed over to associates, he said.

In the next two months, Peterson said, he plans to add 20 menu items, some of them reincarnations of dishes previously taken off the list.

"The kitchen staff is solid," he said. "They're a credit to Todd Fisher for bringing balance and creativity."

Since becoming owner, Peterson said, the biggest challenge — as in any business — is dealing with and managing the varied personalities with-

in the restaurant.

Among immediate plans he has for the white-table cloth dining room are tightening management, increasing patronage, continuing relationships with certain Monterey County produce growers and revamping the Web site.

### Some changes planned

At mid-afternoon Jan. 9, the restaurant's atmosphere was quiet as staff unwound from serving the lunch crowd. The specials of the day, listed on a chalk board in the lobby, included black-eyed pea stew with crispy bacon and salt-and-vinegar chips.

While the restaurant's decor still features the same splash of bold colors and will most likely be retained, some changes are in the air.

Hoping to give Hullabaloo a major facelift, Peterson said he plans to add a couple of aquariums and a plasma screen that shows real-time video of the cooks in action. He envi-

sions removing the divider between the lobby and a function room to allow greater visibility and replacing a wall between function and dining areas with suspended glass. Another expansion he would to see occur at the restaurant, Peterson said, is using the back room as a venue for taping cooking shows that feature the region's chefs.

In his four-year vision, Peterson said, he's working toward opening a second Hullabaloo in one of four selected markets, which he declined to identify. Although he said he's not interested in establishing a franchise, his eventual goal is to operate at least three restaurants.

"It's a matter of procurement, payment and human resources," Peterson said. "All that together makes one incredible recipe for success."

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