



Newhouse: One-stop shop for culinary supplies

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The world's greatest banquet could take place in Oakland. Wolfgang Puck, Alice Waters, Thomas Keller and other great chefs would come together to make it happen. And Oakland has the ideal site with all the necessary supplies.

East Bay Restaurant Supply, just off Interstate 880 at 49 Fourth St., is a warehouse wonderland of culinary products. Forks, spoons, knives, plates, cups, glasses, refrigerators, freezers — it's all there waiting for the ultimate immovable feast.

Space could be cleared for the largest banquet table imaginable. You could fit a pair of 747s side by side in this massive supply warehouse. All that's needed, then, is the food — a trivial matter with California's rich, diversified cuisine.

East Bay Restaurant Supply, an Oakland fixture since 1934, would be the dining room to a guest list of prominent world leaders and celebrities. The Breznikar family has owned the supply business for 76 years, spanning three generations.

John E. Breznikar started the company in 1934 with \$1,600. But this was the Depression, thus the financial ledger after that first year of operation showed \$3.74 in cash and \$830.14 in net profit.

Breznikar grittily hung on and built an empire,

eventually expanding to Los Angeles, Escondido, Sacramento, Reno and Sarasota, Fla.

"My father was a people person," said his son, John L. Breznikar. "He built his business that way, by having people trust him — he had an honest handshake. He would be amazed at the scale we've reached."

John E. worked nearly until he died in 2000 at age 91. His two sons, John L., 59, and Lou, 57, now run the business as equal partners. John L.'s son, Jonathan, 39, and Lou's daughters, Lauren, 31, and Dianne, 27, are employed there, too, and will one day take over the business.

John L. and Lou knew when they were kids that they would work in the business full-time one day. Lou joined in 1971, John L. in 1975. Jonathan was an attorney for three years before deciding to join his father and uncle in 1999.

"I think the pride in working for the family made me do it," Jonathan said of his career switch.

Jonathan's title is vice president of sales. John L. is president and Lou vice president, though they are co-owners, each owning 50 percent of company stock.

This is a family operation, but there is very little family friction.

"Louie and I get along great. We respect each other's roles, and I don't know if we've ever had an issue," John L. said. "Working with family can be difficult. You have to pull your load. When we go home, then we're family members."

East Bay Restaurant Supply started out on 14th

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Street, then moved to 20th Street in 1956, and relocated to Fourth Street in 1975 as the business continued to grow. There are 100 employees now at Fourth Street, and added office space has been acquired near Oakland International Airport.

Though the business is successful, it doesn't enjoy a local monopoly.

"Most people know of us, but it's a very competitive business," said John L. "We have a large competitor in San Francisco in Economy Restaurant Supply. And a couple of New York Stock Exchange companies sell the same supplies we do."

Nevertheless, when customers enter East Bay Restaurant Supply, they are in awe, and not because of the stuffed 12-foot polar bear greeting them at the door. John E. shot the ursine during an Alaska hunting trip in 1966.

"People are amazed by the diversity, the size and all the different choices," John L. said of the vast warehouse.

Plus, there's John E.'s amazing collection of beer steins — a museum of mugs — mostly hidden away in the Fourth Street location's main office.

However, for the world's greatest banquet, they might be brought out.

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Monday, Thursday and Sunday, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Phone 510-208-6466 or e-mail dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com

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