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## Can This Tavern Get Its Groove Back?

By CHRIS BURRELL

OPENING a restaurant in the dead of winter on Martha's Vineyard sounds foolhardy. But in the beginning, the restaurant, Black Dog Tavern, had modest goals. It wanted to give islanders a warm place to come into from the cold. It didn't imagine selling tourists clam chowder by the gallon and bagfuls of T-shirts and baseball caps.

It was 1971, high tide for the counterculture. And the Black Dog's corporate philosophy, according to a former manager, Joe Hall, in a 1992 article in *The Vineyard Gazette*, was "to goof off, have fun, make some money, knock on wood, and serve the community."

The restaurant became a clubby island hangout, and the membership card was the Black Dog T-shirt, with the silhouette of a Labrador on the front and the year on the back. "Wearing one meant you were a groovy wharf kid who hung around with James Taylor and Carly Simon at the No-Nukes concert," said Paul Schneider, a writer who lives in West Tisbury. "At one point we were all in agreement that it was the coolest thing on the coolest island."

Eventually, tourists were lining up at the Black Dog bakery, next to the restaurant, for the T-shirts and sweatshirts. And when they wore them jogging in Central Park or along Rock Creek in Washington, they, too, emanated a bit of that wharf-kid cachet from one of New England's most favored resorts.

There followed mail-order catalogs sent to more than 200,000 customers, a cookbook and more outlets across the island selling anything you could print a black dog on, from dinner plates to doormats. Even Bill Clinton made a stop for souvenirs during a summer vacation (apparently passing some of it along to Monica Lewinsky). The little waterfront restaurant that sat just 50 people had gone global.

The growth and success seemed boundless -- until now. The Black Dog, which for years was the Vineyard's largest for-profit employer, has hit on hard economic times and seen a shake-up of its longtime top management. For the first three months of this year, the tavern was closed, one of the new management's cost-cutting measures.

"There's no hiding it that the Black Dog has experienced some financial difficulty," said Robert Douglas Jr., the new general manager, whose father started the restaurant.

Sales are lagging, down \$2 million in 2001, or 20 percent, Mr. Douglas

acknowledged. The year-round payroll has been cut to 64 -- a long slide from recent years, when the Black Dog carried more than twice that number of employees through the off-season.

"There aren't many business owners who would allow their operation to run 'in the red' every winter season," wrote Elaine Sullivan in "The Black Dog Summer on the Vineyard Cookbook" (Little, Brown, 2000), of which she is a co-author. "The Douglasses do, to keep the staff employed and the tavern open for conversation and fish chowder."

After its cutbacks this winter and the transfer of the Black Dog's advertising and T-shirt printing contracts to off-island companies, after decades of doing business on the Vineyard, many locals have been grumbling that the restaurant has lost its soul.

And Mr. Hall, the former manager, who worked at the restaurant for 22 years, quit in March 2001 and later filed a lawsuit charging the Douglas family with improperly siphoning off hundreds of thousands of dollars from the enterprise. The Douglasses countersued last month, claiming Mr. Hall bilked the company, paid himself unauthorized bonuses and "brought the Black Dog to the brink of financial ruin."

Mr. Douglas, who joined his father's business in October 2000, fresh from flying cargo planes in Florida, said that almost all the economic setbacks at the Black Dog had been caused by the recession. The staff turmoil, he said, is a result of an approach that puts business interests first.

"Day 1, I gave everyone the chance to come on board and change to my philosophy of how the company is going to be managed," he said. "It's business. We don't have the operation that we had two years ago. Unfortunately, these decisions have consequences. Some people found other jobs."

Mr. Douglas smarts under criticism that the Black Dog has lost some of its community-mindedness. His family's commitment to the Vineyard, he argued, can be seen in the schooners in the harbor, owned by his family, which are often used for children's sailing programs.

Reviewing first-quarter revenues, Mr. Douglas said last week that the company is beginning to right itself. "We're tending toward profitability, and in the long run, we're going to do a better job for the community," he said. "We'll be a thousand times better than the original Black Dog."

Maybe so.

But some islanders have grown weary of the mania. "You'd turn on the TV and see some actor wearing a Black Dog hat -- it was overexposure and saturation," said John Johnson, a carpenter who has lived in the Vineyard for 15 years. "They got so popular that very quickly no one from here would wear one. Seeing one was like how to pick who was not from here."

Bob Lee, a house painter from West Tisbury, agreed. "The Black Dog is an icon, but even icons only have their moment in the sun," he said.

But while many have put away their Labrador T-shirts, some still have affection for the easy-going spirit that Black Dog long embodied. "There's a love-hate relationship with the Black Dog," said John Best, a real estate broker in Vineyard Haven. "People have resigned themselves to the idiosyncracies of the Black Dog, like 16 people standing behind the counter and nobody helping you. But at least it had a funky character about it."

To many in the island, the troubles at the Black Dog simply mirror the struggles of the Vineyard, which has ridden the same wave of popularity and suffered the consequences -- skyrocketing real estate values that threaten to make the island unaffordable to longtime residents.

The ominous suspicion about the restaurant's fate, said Mr. Schneider, is that "if the Black Dog had it coming, what's coming for us?"

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