

Small Business Spotlight:
Brenda Van Ember | Owner
The Historic Chilcotin Lodge, Est. 2017

Life Story

Brenda and her husband Kurt both grew up with parents who ran their own businesses. Knowing that they also wanted to work for themselves, the couple gained experience working for franchises before opening their own café chain called “Chestor’s House of Cinnamon” in Salmon Arm in 2003. After many years of hard work, they chose to sell their café chain to franchisees in 2015, before purchasing the Historic Chilcotin Lodge.

What motivated you to start your own business?

When we saw the historic lodge, we fell in love with it and knew this would be our “retirement” business and home. It was a great fit because I can handle the business management and baking, while my husband takes care of building maintenance and additions.

What are some of the challenges of operating a business in a rural part of the province and how did you overcome them?

Networking and community engagement play a huge role in the rural tourism industry, we all support each other. We get to know local business organizations, other businesses and community members – this keeps us informed and enables word of mouth advertising. It’s also important to always “wow” your guests, so they return and tell their friends to visit.

What would be your advice for others starting a business in your industry?

Firstly, do what you love. I love meeting new people and baking, and that’s what I do here. You need to be willing to put in more hours than a typical 9 to 5 job. You should have a good business plan and enough cash flow to get you through the first few years in case something comes up. It’s also helpful to have versatile skills so you can handle most aspects of the business on your own.

How has your business been impacted by, and adapted to, COVID-19?

We bought the Lodge right before the 2017 Hanceville-Riske Creek fires. We were finally recovering with a full summer of guest bookings when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Due to travel limitations, we lost nearly all of our reservations and we closed the Lodge.

I thought about how we could pivot our business and started selling baked goods. From there, we opened an old-fashioned drive-in burger bar where people can safely order and have food delivered right to their car. Guests can also eat at the picnic tables spaced out around our property. Nearby communities are excited to support a local business and enjoy the homemade food and beautiful surroundings. The burger bar has been very successful and sold over a hundred burgers on the first day.

What supports have you used during COVID-19 that you have found helpful?

We have had a lot of support from organizations like Community Futures, that provided us with loans to get through the season, and the Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association that helped with

advertising. We are also so thankful to the residents of Riske Creek and Williams Lake for visiting our burger bar and helping us stay open.

The Bottom Line:

- The Historic Chilcotin Lodge is a family business with one employee, their son, who they hope to pass the business down to.
- While keeping the charm and history of the 1940s building, the Lodge plans to add animals to their barn, expand their giftshop and games room, and build more washrooms and cabins to increase capacity.
- The Lodge has ten guest rooms, two of which have been opened to allow for social distancing and will stay open throughout the winter.
- The seasonal burger bar closed at the end of September, however, due to its popularity, will likely return in future years