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## Taking the lead



JAMASB SOKANSANU

Ken Weber, the owner and president of Weber's in Ann Arbor, is flanked by his sons Brian, left, and Michael, who are both company vice presidents.

# Working for Weber's is a tradition for family

**By Frank Witsil**

Detroit Free Press

Ken Weber said he grew up in Weber's — the restaurant and boutique hotel business in Ann Arbor his father founded in 1937 — and always expected he'd play a role in the business.

"I knew," Weber, now 60, said, "it was my destiny."

He's now the owner and president — and grooming two of his three sons — Michael, 29, and Brian, 26 — to run, and potentially expand, the enterprise.

Weber's, which employs about 200 people, is investing about \$2 million to renovate the hotel's 158 rooms, enhancing the bathrooms and adding more technology. It generates annual revenues of more than \$12 million — 60% of which comes from the restaurant and 40% from the hotel.

"When people stay at a hotel, they notoriously aren't going to want to eat meals there because the hotel doesn't focus on the meals," Weber said. "This is one of the major differences between our place and almost any other place. Our philosophy is if we have a restaurant that the local people still want to go to that's going to give us a competitive edge."

In a conversation edited for brevity and clarity, Weber talked about how his father, Herman Weber, started the company — and ended up living to be 100. He also outlined how he now intends to pass the business on to a third

## KEN WEBER

**Age:** 60

**Title:** Owner, president

**Experience:** After graduating from college, he took a job with the Gilbert-Robinson company, which owned casual restaurants and bars. He worked for the company for about a year, and then started working in the family business.

**Education:** Michigan State University, bachelor's degree in hospitality

**Family:** Wife, Mary; sons, Bill, 32; Michael, 29; Brian, 26

**Hobbies:** travel, hockey

**Car:** 2015 Dodge Challenger SRT

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opened and there was a piece of land he went to buy, which he did. That was when he built the existing restaurant. To this day, the original building is still there — and the original stained leaded-glass windows are there, too.

**Q: When did you realize running the family business was your destiny?**

**A:** We were born into it. Growing up, whenever there was a breakfast or dinner and we were at the kitchen table we were hearing what was going on at work and the issues of the day. My parents worked there every day. My sister and I, when we were 10 years old, we started working in the business. As time went on, it just seemed natural that I'd want to continue it.

Weber generation.

**QUESTION: What is the story behind how the business came into existence?**

**ANSWER:** That was during the Depression years, and my father was a farmer in Chelsea. He would take the street car in to Ann Arbor and sell chickens to a local German restaurant. When the season ended, a guy in the restaurant offered him a position in the kitchen. That's how he first got involved in the restaurant business. Then, what happened was a bankrupt diner that sold gasoline came on the market for lease. He was able to save up enough money to take over the lease. He basically served beer and hamburgers and pumped gas. It turned out he had such a successful restaurant business that the people at the gas station cut his lease off because he wasn't selling enough gas.

**Q: So that became Weber's?**

**A:** No. That was a precursor to Weber's. He lost his lease, and after that he ended up leasing another place on U.S.-12. He ran that for several years. But, the owner wouldn't renew the lease and took it over to run himself. So he built up two businesses and lost them. He said: "That's crazy. This time, I'm going to own my own business." He was able to build a cinder-block restaurant. That was the first business that was called Weber's. He was doing well there, and about at the same time I-94

**Q: Two of your sons are in the business now. Will you sell to them? Is Weber's their inheritance?**

**A:** There certainly is a need for them to get ownership in the business and we're working in that direction.

**Q: So they want to take over the business?**

**A:** Yes. It's to the point now, we're into the third generation and there's a lot of pride in understanding how few family-run businesses last that long and how everything is being bought up by the real estate investment trusts. Basically, we just have a stubborn independence to make Weber's a pertinent place in Ann Arbor.

**Q: Do you have a succession plan?**

**A:** Yes we do. Right now we're developing Michael and Brian. Michael has been with the business six years, and Brian just came back six months ago. They are young, smart and eager.

**Q: Having two sons in the business is both a blessing and a challenge. Who ends up being in charge?**

**A:** That's true, and we haven't crossed that bridge yet. But, our thinking down the road is the best way to resolve that issue is to expand. We haven't gone deeper into that.

**Q: Will you ever retire?**

**A:** No. I'll die. My dad never retired.