



# *THE NEW KRABLOONIK*

*After years of controversy and a mandate for serious change, Snowmass Village's dog-sledding destination is once again a place to visit in good conscience.*

By LAUREL MILLER  
Photography by ZACH MAHONE





FURRY FERRARIS Teams of eight to 10 dogs pull the sleds at Krabloonik, which fit two adult passengers and one small child, plus a musher. Opposite page: Retired sled dog Nemo, 12, is undergoing adoption training.

It's a warm October day at Krabloonik, the restaurant and dog-sledding operation located just west of Snowmass Village. The aspens shimmer gold while a barren Mount Daly looms in the distance. As I climb out of my car to meet with Krabloonik's relatively new owners, Danny and Gina Phillips, the kennel erupts with howling. It's normal behavior for sled dogs, working canines that are derived from selectively breeding husky, malamute and hound bloodlines. I stop and listen for a moment, enjoying the wild, mournful sound so perfectly suited for this alpine setting.

My mission today is to learn more about the Phillipses' holistic approach to sled-dog management and training, which is a radical departure from what modern mushers and trainers call old-school methods. The couple purchased Krabloonik (the name purportedly means "white eyebrows" in Eskimo) in December 2014. The operation was founded in 1949 by Stuart and Isabel Mace, who set up a small dog-sledding business and lodge, called Toklat, near Ashcroft in the Castle Creek Valley south of Aspen. The kennel gained prominence in the mid-1950s when the Maces loaned their land and dogs for the filming of *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*, a television series. In 1974, Stuart retired, giving 55 of his sled dogs to Dan MacEachen, one of his mushers, who moved the operation to its current location in Snowmass and renamed it Krabloonik.

MacEachen oversaw the kennel and affiliated restaurant for years but started publicly running into trouble in 2008, when local animal-rights activists took notice of conditions and accused him of mistreating his sled dogs. Issues included dogs tethered on short chains, lack of water, poor nutrition and unkempt grounds (he pleaded guilty to one count of animal cruelty last April). Visitors still kept the operation fairly busy, but the constant negative chatter also drove many away.

When the Phillipses took over, there were 255 dogs and 45 employees, and Krabloonik's reputation was "in dire straits," says Danny. "It was a huge risk taking on such a controversial and seasonal operation, but it offered nothing but rewards, as far as we were concerned."

Danny, 41, got his start at Krabloonik in winter 2000. He was living in Snowmass and working in the valley when, on a whim, he took a job as a rookie musher. He fell in love with his furry charges, mushing and the sled-dog lifestyle.

Working under MacEachen, Danny learned the basics and then was mentored by other industry professionals, eventually training champion dogs for the Iditarod. He and Gina started their own dog-sledding venture in Sandpoint, Idaho, before returning to the Roaring Fork Valley. In November 2013, they read in the local paper that Krabloonik's then-general manager, Guy Courtney, had resigned. The couple called MacEachen, who offered Danny the position of kennel manager. A month later, the Phillipses returned to Krabloonik and

began talks about purchasing the business.

Gina, 36, has more than 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry and serves as director of operations for the restaurant and property, while Danny runs the kennel, which now houses 211 dogs. Their three children, ages seven to 16, are actively involved in the business too.

After buying Krabloonik, task No. 1 for the Phillipses was addressing the controversial practices and mending the business' reputation. "We have a responsibility to the dogs and the community to represent Krabloonik as a positive thing, and we're developing educational initiatives to facilitate that process," says Gina. "There are [fewer] than 100 people left in the United States practicing dog sledding as a profession, and our goal is to help preserve this traditional, historical way of life."

To that end, the Phillipses have already implemented an open-door policy, welcoming visitors year-round to see the dogs and kennels. They are looking beyond tourism, however, when it comes to educating the community. This winter, for example, Krabloonik will hold a mushing course for eighth-graders from the Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork. They also plan to implement therapeutic training programs with at-risk youth and the Wounded Warrior Project.

One of the most significant changes, however, occurred at the top. "We've altered the breeding," says Danny, whose eventual goal is a cap of 180 dogs. (Even with the reduction, Krabloonik will remain the largest dog-sledding





**HOME, SWEET HOME**  
From left: Krabloonik's new owners replaced most of the wooden dog houses with insulated and vented plastic shelters; the sign that welcomes visitors is one of the few elements that hasn't changed.



kennel in the continental United States.)

"This is a long-term plan," he continues. "In the '90s, smaller, short-haired hound bloodlines became the industry standard because smaller, faster dogs are better for racing. But the breeding went too far, and the coats became too short to provide adequate warmth." The Phillipses are going back to breeding bigger, longer-haired dogs, (though they won't have the traditional thick husky coats, so as to prevent overheating). "Our average dog's weight now is 45 pounds; 75 to 85 pounds is our goal," Danny adds. "That will also reduce the number of dogs needed to pull a sled from 10 to eight."

Says Aspen Animal Shelter Executive Director Seth Sachson, "I'm pleased to see that the Phillipses are breeding back to larger, thicker-furred dogs. In conjunction with their open-door policy, I believe they're proving themselves to be loving, compassionate caretakers." The couple has also worked closely with Sachson on spay/neuter and adoption programs; to date, they've placed more than 45 dogs—mostly older animals and those with short hair—in permanent homes.

Adds local Ed Foran, a retired multitime Iditarod and Yukon Quest finisher and former Colorado Mountain Musher's member, "I believe the Phillipses are committed to bringing Krabloonik into the 21st century by implementing more humane treatment and kennel management, including socialization from puppyhood."

Humane stewardship goes far beyond fluffy coats, as hinted by Foran. Says Danny, "Our biggest priority is what's best for the dogs. The

core of a sled dog is its willingness to please—it's one of the things they're bred for. You need to take a natural approach to training, relying on a dog's instinctive behaviors as a domesticated pack animal. We focus solely on the bond between musher and dog, and use positive reinforcement for good behavior, relying upon vocal commands and hand gestures for training and work."

Adds Gina, "To us, holistic means an overall approach where their care is concerned. It's mind-body wellness, in addition to quality of life and training methods."

The biggest modification the Phillipses have made for the Krabloonik dogs is in terms of socialization: The dogs are off tether more often and play together in supervised small groups that also allow for more one-on-one attention from staffers. The payoffs have been huge. "They're completely changed," says Danny. "They rarely fight, and there's no aggression. Our philosophy is, 'It's never the dog's fault.' Just as with people, there's a reason a dog acts or reacts in a certain way, whether it's a bad habit picked up from another dog or musher, discomfort or other issues. Our job is to figure out what the problem is and find a solution."

#### NOT YOUR AVERAGE DOGS

All working dogs have been bred over generations to possess specific characteristics such as guarding or maintaining eye contact with livestock. Sled dogs—which, says Danny, have an intellectual capacity equivalent to that of a 5-year-old child—have been bred for endurance, agility and speed.

They also need personal space. Explains Gina, "They have a lot of energy, and after a busy day interacting with people and other dogs, they're ready to go back to their houses and decompress. They need that time without stimulation in order to regroup."

Ironically, these innate boundaries are linked to one of the biggest complaints leveled against the dog-sledding industry: the practice of tethering, or tying dogs to stakes or to their kennels.

Opponents cite tethering as inhumane, without necessarily taking into account that sled dogs are working animals, not house pets. Says Danny, "The modern thinking with regard to sled dogs is that it's critical for them to have year-round training to stimulate their minds and bodies, and that includes time off tether. But the way sled dogs think goes back thousands of years, to when man and dog first formed a working relationship." The Krabloonik dogs do get time to run free, but they are also kept on tethers that are 6 feet, 2 inches long, permitting them access to shelter, food and water, as well as comfortable movement.

Those accustomed to working with sled dogs believe that tethering keeps the dogs safe. "Even with an abundance of socialization, sled dogs are genetically predisposed to run and hunt wild game," notes Foran. "Eventually, they'll find their way back home, but you can't run them off-leash as you would a house pet. They also have a tendency to get into scuffles and can be difficult to manage in a group because they have a pack mentality and the alpha(s) need to assert dominance."





**GETTING AN EARFUL**  
"Some people ask me if I'm a  
dog whisperer," says Danny  
Phillips, with Triumph, 9. "I  
say, 'I'm a dog listener.'"



NEW VIEWS Danny and Gina Phillips with Tahoe, center, and two 7-week-old pups. Says Gina, "Dog sledding used to be known as the 'old man's sport,' but like many things—ranching, farming, horsemanship, even parenting—it's evolved."





While the community has been largely supportive of the changes implemented by the Phillipses, there remain concerns over any kind of tethering. Says Bill Fabrocini, co-founder of activist group Voices for the Sled Dogs, which was formed in 2008 to protest MacEachen's practices, "Danny has expressed to me that the transition to get the dogs off the chains will take time since many of the dogs were never socialized as puppies, and he needs to figure out which dogs get along with one another. That makes sense to me, and I completely understand this approach. But we do have some fundamental differences in terms of tethering. I'm not criticizing them, and we applaud any and all efforts they've made for the greater good of the animals, including the new doghouses that provide greater protection against the elements and the addition of open-space areas for the dogs to be grouped together and off-tether."

Those with concerns about tethering may take heart in a developing shift in attitude among modern mushers. "Tethering should be interspersed with conditioning and exercise yards where dogs can play and run loose with an observer present," says Lynn Whipple, president of Rocky Mountain Sled Dog Club and a competitive dog sledder. But she cautions against an unregulated free-for-all. "I've witnessed dogs get hung up in each other's collars during loose group play, and it's a very scary experience. They freak out, and I've heard of tragic outcomes with such incidents."

#### BONDING WITH THE DOGS

Krabloonik employs 15 to 20 mushers (out of 50 employees total), each of whom is responsible for their teams, including several designated lead animals. Forming a close bond with every animal is crucial in order to enable the dogs to perform well as individuals and together. If a dog doesn't trust its musher or other people, its quality of life is significantly affected.

Just like humans, sled dogs have off-days. "Each musher's dogs have their own section of the kennel, and every morning during the season, the mushers will ask their teams, 'Who wants to go?'" says Danny. A dog that isn't enthusiastic about hitting the trail undergoes a wellness check to make sure there's no underlying illness or injury. It's one of the ways in which the dogs' health is assessed on a daily basis. The dogs are also trained to put their paws on mushers' chests, which enables checking for tumors, injuries and general wellness. "Having the dogs upright is easier on the mushers' bodies, but it's also a time for us to hug and bond with them individually," adds Danny. Additional bonding occurs during regular post-run massages for the dogs.

While endearing, the paws-on-shoulders move can have an eventual drawback. When retired sled dogs—10 is the average age—are put up for adoption, would-be owners may be

put off by such behavior. The Phillipses consult with them beforehand, explaining the unique attributes and psychology of sled dogs. Though the dogs can be trained to adopt more traditional pet behaviors, innate traits like howling are simply part of their bloodlines.

#### BUILDING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As part of Krabloonik's agreement with the town of Snowmass Village, which includes a lease for the land it's on, a six-member review committee will keep regular tabs on the operation. Three members were appointed by the town, and three by the Phillipses. Though many questioned the lease arrangement when the kennel was previously under fire, the new ownership seems to have quelled official concerns. Says Snowmass Village Town Manager Clint Kinney, "We consider Krabloonik one of our community's iconic treasures, and the town has worked closely with Dan and Gina to ensure that it remains available to residents and guests long into the future."

Another goal moving forward, say the Phillipses, is to become a more sustainable business year-round. Last summer, they managed to keep half of their staff employed with off-season work and kennel tours. The seasonal nature and narrow scope of a dog-sledding operation, however, don't provide financial security, even with Krabloonik's summer restaurant hours. Hence, the Phillipses recently purchased Independence Pass Outfitting Company, which they will relaunch next summer. Danny is also an experienced horseman and former trainer, and applies a similar holistic approach to working with equines. Guests will be able to go on trail rides and pack trips, including a luxury-oriented excursion from Aspen to Crested Butte.

What hasn't changed at Krabloonik, thankfully, is the sheer exhilaration of going on a dog-sled ride—flying across the snow pulled by a vocal team of working animals excited to do the job for which they've been bred, the quiet of the surrounding scenery in contrast. It's the same experience that led the Maces to start their operation all those years ago in order to share their passion with guests.

And there is perhaps no one better to reflect on the new Krabloonik than the Maces' daughter, Lynn, who lives in Basalt and runs the Toklat Gallery there. "It's the legacy of Toklat, and what my father started, that's being preserved," she says. "After visiting four times this past summer, I'm ecstatic about what the Phillipses are doing. Danny reminds me of my father when he was younger—his passion and how he's almost Messianic in his care of the dogs. Both he and Gina are doing a phenomenal job, especially given the changes they've managed to accomplish in just a year."

If those changes are any indication, the dogs at Krabloonik—as well as the business itself—have a much brighter future. ■

## DINE BY THE DOGS

*Krabloonik's restaurant, known for its Colorado game dishes and rustic elegance, renews its charm. —LM*

#### Executive Chef Edward

**Schmidt** recently returned for a second tenure at Krabloonik, disproving the adage "You can never go back."

Schmidt discovered the Roaring Fork Valley on long-ago climbing trips. He first headed up Krabloonik's kitchen in 2003. Four years later, he relocated to Boulder but eventually returned to the valley to become executive chef at Aspen's Kenichi. Last summer he returned to Krabloonik.

Says restaurant manager Gina Phillips of the updated eatery, "Formality isn't who [husband] Danny and I are, so we're focusing on a more relaxed, family atmosphere that matches the log-cabin setting. We want all of our guests to feel immediately at home."

Schmidt has remained true to Krabloonik's gamecentric menu and sources local products when possible. While returning guests have come to expect signature dishes like the wild mushroom soup with housemade creme fraiche, sweet herbs and white truffle oil (\$9), they can also dine on updated fare like mesquite-grilled wapiti elk tenderloin with Boursin whipped potatoes and sun-dried blueberry demi-glace (\$56), and cedar-plank-roasted Alaskan salmon with foie-gras butter (\$32). An award-winning wine list, wood-burning stove and sunken fire pit—not to mention panoramic views of Mount Daly and Capitol Peak—make the cozy 75-seat dining room a destination in itself. A la carte meals are available in addition to morning and afternoon hourlong dog-sled rides with lunch (\$315 per person), or twilight rides with dinner (\$375). 4250 Divide Road, Snowmass Village, 970.923.3953, [krabloonik.com](http://krabloonik.com)

