

# THE FOLKS

## Behind the Fishing

By Dave Holton

A fishing marina relies on people – people to manage the dry dock, people to drive the boats and people to clean the fish. But when you ask those people what really makes a marina special, they'll tell you something else. They'll tell you that it's *you*, the people who visit them every year to go out fishing.



### Todd Cummings

Marina Manager and Lift Operator

Todd Cummings speaks with an accent that stands out from the “Hoi Toiders” of Wanchese. He grew up in Long Island, NY, clamming the Great South Bay with two older brothers. Todd first came to the Outer Banks on a family vacation a few decades ago. “Wasn’t much here at that point,” he laughs. Now, he considers himself more at home on the Outer Banks, where he’s raised two children, than in New York. “It’s been five years since I last visited. When I go there, I’m quickly ready to come back home.”

In 1989, Todd started in marina work over at the Salty Dawg in Manteo. When the Salty Dawg shut down, most the boats moved to Outer Banks Marina. “The Salty Dawg closed down in October 2004, and I was here by November.” Thanks to that transition, his relationships with some of the owners who keep boats in the Outer Banks Marina’s dry dock go back 25 years.

The marina has a community feel that sits well with Todd. “A lot of the boat captains and the other guys, after the days are over, we go down to the Tiki Bar together,” he says. And he likes the convenience of the marina. “There’s an electronics guy, Joe’s Marine for outboards, and plenty of fiberglass people to call. You have everything you need right here.”

When asked the most important part of his job, Todd laughs. “Making sure people are happy.” But that’s not always easy when it comes to moving boats. “Ninety percent of people are easy, but then there are some that are a bit tougher,” he says. “Some people watch us move their boats around on the lift, and they ask, ‘Are you sure you can do this?’” He laughs again. “But I get it. These boats are their babies.”

He assures customers that he and his colleague, Ed Baldwin, know what they’re doing. “It’s either Ed or me moving the boat, not some kid like you’ll find at other marinas. We won’t lift a boat we can’t lift, even if the owners are persistent.”

“These boats are their babies.”



### Frank Smith

Boat Captain

Captain Frank Smith loves when people come aboard the *Wild Card*, his twin diesel-powered, 35-foot Bertram, just to sit and talk. “I’m subject to talk you to death because I love what I’m doing.”

A Coast Guard serviceman turned fisherman, Captain Frank hails from Bath, NC. He remembers his first fishing trip well. When he was just 12, he went fishing for cod from a head boat. “She dipped down, and the water sprayed over me,” he says, “and I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

Captain Frank appreciates how Outer Banks locals look out for each other. “Back when I didn’t know nothing about nothing, I lost my rudder. Here I was a young guy, broke and stuck. And a local crabber towed me all the way in. Didn’t want money, just helped me out. You just don’t find that other places.”

Now, he tries to impart that same feeling to those who come out fishing with him. “I’ll do whatever it takes. If folks have a good time on the first trip, they’re hooked for life.” He demands the same from his mates, who deal firsthand with the customers.

Captain Frank knows what it takes to keep people happy. “You get some folks who don’t want to fish, like this one little girl, recently. Next thing you know I’ve got her up driving the boat.” He shows off a picture of her at the helm. “Look at the smile on her face. That says it all. And I’m just as excited as they are, every day.”

Even after a lifetime of shrimping and commercial fishing, Captain Frank still doesn’t ever get burned out. “There are days when you are tired, sunburned, then you look over and you see that sunset, or the next morning you see that sunrise, and that’s like the biggest cup of coffee you could ever have.”

Captain Frank Smith grins wide and tips his stainless-steel cup toward the sky to emphasize his last point. “If the good Lord takes me tomorrow, I don’t want no tears, because I have been truly blessed.”



### Bucky Mann

Fish Cleaner

“What better office could you ask for,” says Bucky Mann, fish cleaner. “I look out over these boats every morning, and I wonder how people do anything else.”

A true Wanchese – “born and raised here, across the creek” – Bucky Mann was 8 when he first went out on a fishing boat. “Been at the marina for a long time.” He says. “Went to school with Wayne [Umphlett, owner of Outer Banks Marina]. When I talked to him about a job, he hired me on the spot.”

For two decades, Bucky’s office has been a shack that’s just a short walk from the Ship’s Store. It’s an open-air operation, something Bucky fought for because it allows people to watch his employees work. “I think people want to see that the fish they get after its cleaned is the fish they caught. Other places take your fish into some back room and give you a vacuum-sealed bag. We don’t do that.”

In the summer that means hard work in the heat. “But it’s like a show. Most people seen nothing like it before,” he says. “Our main objective is to do as good a job as possible and do as quick a job as possible so people can get home and enjoy their catch. My guys can clean a 40-pound tuna



Bucky loves to sit with his dog Maggie, who he’s trained to keep the birds away from the fish.

in under two minutes. I’ve cleaned 4-ounce croakers in the morning and 350-pound tuna in the afternoon, and people are just as excited by both.”

And if you’re wondering how to fix your catch, Bucky knows a thing or two. “Many people’s first question is ‘How do I cook this?’ so I made up a cookbook with a few of my old family recipes.”

Bucky loves to sit with his dog Maggie, who he’s trained to keep the birds away from the fish. “I’ve looked over the bows of these boats a thousand times and seen the sun come up,” he says. “There’s nothing like it in the world.”

But most of all, Bucky Mann loves meeting people. “They come from all over, and some people we see again year after year. I just enjoy talking to them.”



It’s about time to make a few new fishing buddies, wouldn’t you say?

Folks like Todd Cummings, Captain Frank Smith and Bucky Mann are the lifeblood of the marina, but they can’t wait to meet you, the other half of the equation. So head on over to Outer Banks Marina. They’ll be there, waiting to welcome you in and get you out on the water.



708 Harbor Drive, Wanchese • (252) 473-5344 • obxmarina.com

October comes, and  
thar she blows,  
A whale of a feast, as  
ocean fare goes,  
Live music and art, big  
boats and learnin',  
And tossin' a mullet if  
that's what yer yearnin'.

Come one, come all to the annual  
Outer Banks Seafood Festival ...

Yes indeed, the Outer Banks Seafood Festival, brought to you since 2012 by sponsors TowneBank and the Outer Banks Visitors Bureau, returns for its sixth year on October 21 from 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the festival's organizers and sponsors just can't wait to welcome all of you who wish to partake of the smorgasbord of food and fun that they have prepared. "This is truly a family event and one that people won't want to miss," says Mike Pringle, Chairman of the Outer Banks Seafood Festival's Executive Board.

The main attraction, of course, will be the feast. More than 15 local restaurants will battle it out to earn the People's Choice Award for Best Local Dish presented by TowneBank. In 2016, Stripers Bar & Grill took home the top prize, and there will be plenty of competitors looking to knock off the reigning champ. This year, voting cards will be distributed to the first 7,500 attendees through the Festival's ticket gates.

# ONE FISH, TWO FISH, TILEFISH, BLUEFISH

By Dave Holton

Voting will close at 4:30 p.m., and the award presentation will be at approximately 5:20 p.m. Local breweries and wineries will also be on hand to provide the adults with a bit of local flavor, and there will plenty of Pepsi products for the children. Budweiser products will also be available for brand-loyal consumers.

Thanks to entertainment sponsors OBX Chevrolet and Duck Thru, live music will fill the air from the stage where local favorites Out 'N the Cold, Old Enough to Know Better and The Crowd will complement feature acts The Jamie Pridgen Band and Kevin Mac. Be sure to check the festival website for more info on the program schedule and to keep up with any changes to the lineup.

To round out the festival for the whole family, there will be a Kid Zone and a Mullet Toss (it's pretty much exactly what it sounds like, and, yes, it's awesome). Local artists and craft artisans will have booths set up to display some of the works that the one-of-a-kind creative environment of the Outer Banks both inspires and nurtures. And the festival plans to provide something new this year, a boat and tackle show that should be a hit with attendees of all ages.

**Oh, there be FUN, there be  
no doubt, but that's not all  
this Fest's about ...**

The organizers of the festival represent a cross section of the greater community, with board members hailing from local businesses, the Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce, Outer Banks Visitors Bureau, Outer Banks Catch and the Outer Banks Restaurant Association. Outer Banks Seafood Festival is a nonprofit organization, and all net proceeds are donated to various causes, grants and scholarships. With such a diversity of perspectives among the organization's leadership, you can be sure that the festival will consider all options when it comes to giving back after the festivities have concluded and all the \$5 entrance fees have been counted.

SATURDAY

October  
**21**

10:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

(252)441-8144

outerbanksseafoodfestival.org



In 2016, the festival was held on the heels of Hurricane Matthew, and despite the difficulties of organizing a festival during a time most vendors were mired in cleanup and repairs, the team managed to put together a memorable day for more than 6,000 attendees. With the devastation of Hurricane Matthew still fresh at the time, last year's choice was a no-brainer. "We were able to donate more than \$5,000 to Outer Banks Relief Fund," says Mike.

The collaborative team behind the festival aims to achieve some lofty goals, and so far has delivered year after year, providing visitors to the Outer Banks a delightful day of feasting (and mullet tossing) each October. And this year they expect to up their game. "Every year we get better at staging, working with the restaurants and making sure people have everything they need.

"We set out to provide visitors with something special during the shoulder season, something that enhances our community and highlights the seafood heritage of the Outer Banks," says Mike. "This is one of the premiere Outer Banks events, and it's grown bigger and stronger every year. We hope to see 9,000 to 10,000 people this year."

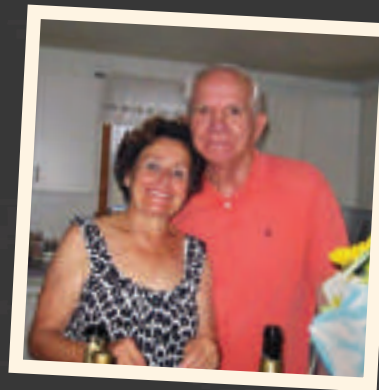
Come on out to the Outer Banks Seafood Festival this October. The team will be ready and waiting. For more information check out <http://outerbanksseafoodfestival.org>, where the team provides answers to questions people have about parking (there's no parking on-site, but there will be shuttles available), the schedule of events and much, much more.

**So mark your marks, to-do  
your to-dos,  
And set your date for yippees  
and wahoos,  
This festival promises oodles  
of fun,  
With seafood aplenty, served up  
by the ton!**



# A FAMILY TRADITION

By Dave Holton



**MY DAD ALWAYS STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING FOR THE COMMUNITY," SAYS STEVE KIOUSIS, OWNER OF STACK 'EM HIGH IN KITTY HAWK.**

In 1968, when Perry and Kiki Kiouisis brought their two boys, Steve and Nick, to vacation in Kill Devil Hills, Perry saw something in the quiet, empty beach town that many others might have missed – a thriving community in the making. Back then, you could check the surf from the main road (which, like the beach road, was only two lanes then) because there weren't many houses blocking your view.

But Perry Kiouisis saw the potential that this place held. He immediately walked into a real estate office and asked for a restaurant, and, in 1969, Perry and Kiki opened Point Harbor Restaurant at the foot of the Wright Memorial Bridge. As a family, Perry, Kiki, Steve and Nick ran Point Harbor from 1969 to 1980. After they sold the Point Harbor Restaurant, they opened the first Stack 'em High in KDH in 1981. Four years later, in 1985, they opened the second Stack 'em High in Kitty Hawk. Though Perry has since died, his sons have carried on his legacy not only in running their restaurants but also in giving back to the greater community of the Outer Banks. Both restaurants have remained busy to this day. Steve and his wife, Kristine, own and operate the Kitty Hawk location and Nick and his wife, Dawn, own and operate the KDH location.

"We have always believed in giving back, so we do a lot of events and fundraisers," says Steve. "I deal mainly with schools and churches, and my brother works with the YMCA, Kiwanis, Rotary Club as well as the OBX Marathon and Nags Head Wood Run. I do about 30 fundraisers each year."

Steve, a strong believer in Christian values and a dedicated family man, has four children ranging in ages from 20 months to 21 years. He speaks about them as most fathers do, with a mix of pride, humility and loving irritation. "My youngest has been testing us a bit lately," he says, grinning. "But, hey, that's part of the deal." Steve knows what it takes to raise a family on the Outer Banks, and just like his father before him, Steve wants to help build up an even stronger community for his children.

"I remember as a kid growing up here what it was like to not have much," he says. "Because it just wasn't here. A lot didn't exist. I believe in starting things, and I want this place to keep getting better, to be better for my children, for other people's children. I think of the restaurant as a base of operations for me to connect with the community."

Steve's restaurant offers full catering services, appropriately coined after Steve and Nick's mother. Catering by Kiki's Kitchen offers food ranging from Greek all the way to Mexican! They've been known to handle large events, including weddings. Since Steve's team has this capability, he uses it to support various groups in the community. Steve has catered events serving up to 500 people at churches

like the Duck United Methodist Church to help raise scholarship funds. He's helped with events to honor students excelling in athletics and academics at First Flight and events to honor the teachers as well. Every week he caters morning breakfasts for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He's always looking for more opportunities to give.

Steve likes to think of his restaurant as a hub for locals, transplants and tourists alike. "We stay open year-round, which is great because we really get to know the locals." But he appreciates newcomers to the community just as much. "There are a lot of people, especially retirees, moving into the community

every year. These people are a part of our community too. I believe we should make sure they feel welcome.

"Sure, people get upset about a little traffic in the summertime," he says, "but I like to remind them how truly blessed we all are to live here on the Outer Banks! I say go over there, sit on this beach, look out at the water and then tell me you're still upset."

Naturally, Steve believes in progress. He exhibits this belief in his own restaurant. Recently, he added a small breakfast counter area because he believed that the older individuals in the community, especially those who have been widowed, would benefit from having a place to hang out and meet other people. "There are lonely folks out there, and these aren't the type to sit around all day staring at their phones. They need a place to go and speak to people, a place where they can feel at home but have company. I'm trying to provide that." Like most entrepreneurs and visionaries, Steve made this move based on a hunch that it could provide something to a certain group of people, and since the counter's installation, he's already seen the impact.

In addition to

retirees, Stack 'em High gets a lot of other regulars in as well. "On any given day, we have everybody and their brother. When you own a pancake house and sell breakfast and lunch, and you've been doing it as long as we have, you tend to make a lot of friends.

As for the changes in the greater community, Steve does his best to keep it all in perspective and take the long view. He grew up in a visionary household, with parents who could look at a mostly empty Outer Banks and see an opportunity, a community in the making. While others might complain about noise and traffic and overcrowding, it should be no surprise that Steve sees the changes to the area and the growth as more than just an inconvenience.

"People are trying to protect the Outer Banks, to keep it from being ruined," he says. "I agree, but we have to balance progress with simplicity. I get people in my restaurant who work on the dredge barges or are building the water park. I tell them that they are welcome and that I support what they do because I don't know if they hear that from everyone."

Stack 'em High has quite the history, and making it work for 30 years has not been easy. But for the Kiouisis family, the rewards lay beyond successfully running a restaurant. "I've had opportunities to expand, to go into franchising, but I've turned them down. I want to stay here, to pour coffee, to shake hands and talk to people. It's not easy

to make a living here, but there's the ocean, there's the sound and there's a great community in between. It's a wonderful life."

When you go to Stack 'em High, you can fill up on great food. They are famous for their mouthwatering pancakes and waffles, and they also offer tasty omelet choices. They provide plenty of local flavor and of course Greek options, so everyone will find something to love as far as their stomachs are concerned. You can even come in for lunch!

Beyond the food, though, you'll also find yourself at a community centerpiece that was first conceived by two visionary parents and now continues to grow under the dedicated watch of two faithful sons and their families.

**The Outer Banks' Original Pancake House**



## BREAKFAST & LUNCH



☛ (252) 261-8221 ~ 3801 N. CROATAN HIGHWAY ~ MP 4 ~ KITTY HAWK ~ STACKEMHIGH.COM ☛

# A Tale of MERMAIDS WILD HORSES AND WINE

By Dave Holton

It's probably not a stretch for you to imagine that you're on the beach right now, slathered in sunscreen, with one eye on your kids playing in the surf and the other on a book. In fact, maybe that's *exactly* where you are, right now ... nice, right?

But maybe you'd like for your vacation to be more than just nice. To be something you can remember when you are back in the day-to-day of managing the rewarding but often overwhelming challenges of life as a parent, or student, or worker or fill-in-the-blank-here.

What could take your Outer Banks vacation from nice to extraordinary and memorable? Maybe it would be an evening sampling of North Carolina's wines and a sunset on the water. A glimpse of a wild stallion and a bald eagle from a boat? It could be a healthy dose of Outer Banks history and lore from a local?

And what about the kids? What will they tell their friends when they get back to school – that they got to swim in the ocean? What if they could say they turned into mermaids? What if *you* could say that? You probably grew up on Disney like everyone else. Admit it, at some point *you* wanted to be Ariel too.

Over the last few years, Kitty Hawk Kites has been hard at work developing two experiences that will let you accomplish all that in one day ... The Mermaid School and the Vineyard Voyage.

## Welcome to the Mermaid School

When he started selling "Fin Fun Mermaid Tails" in his stores, Kitty Hawk Kites founder John Harris knew he wanted to offer more than just the product. One of the core values of Kitty Hawk Kites is safety, so John asked, "Wouldn't it be great if we could teach people how to swim in the tails safely?"

"But [the Mermaid School] is not just about swimming around in the tail," says Luke Baer, Recreational Sales Manager. "In line with teaching someone to fly, we wanted to give people a real experience."

Brooke Rowe, who has an eclectic background in communications, lifeguarding, scuba diving, musical theater and production design, signed on as Head Mermaid Instructor, and the team partnered with Sanderling Resort in Duck and Beachwoods Resort in Kitty Hawk. In 2016, the Mermaid School started offering classes two days a week at Sanderling Resort and five days a week at Beachwoods, and they are now working to expand to new places and pools.

According to Brooke, "the students have a fin-tastic time!" as they learn dolphin kicks and other tricks. Group lessons are available for those 7 and older (private lessons are available for those 6 and older), and no one's ever too old to be a mermaid. Says Brooke, "Equal amounts of adults and kids take the class. And we have lots of mermen too." She laughs. "The adults find it more challenging than the kids!"

The class has a theatrical element, and everyone gets involved. "The older students help the younger students," says Brooke, "and

everyone is part of a mermaid pod." The class seems to have a confidence-building effect on the students. "Everyone comes out of their shells," says Brooke with another laugh. After the class, students leave with official certificates and can arrange to have photos and video, should they want more proof of their transformation.

With one instructor to every four students, no one is left to flounder on their own. And safety always comes first. "All instructors are lifeguard, CPR and First Aid certified," says Luke, "and all students must pass a swim test before class."

And as one customer wrote on their instructor feedback form, "They were extremely patient in helping my child who was having trouble picking up the motion. They made sure she had fun!"

For more information, be sure to check out the Mermaid School Instagram page, @KHKMermaid, or website, [www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/mermaid-school](http://www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/mermaid-school).

## And next up, the Vineyard Voyage

Brian Efland, a captain who worked for nearly 10 years with Sea Grant and N.C. State, first came to Kitty Hawk Kites with an idea to build a special boat to carry groups on eco tours across the Currituck Sound. They pitched him on a destination – Sanctuary Vineyards in Currituck. Together, they now offer the Vineyard Voyage: a boat ride that starts in Duck and ends with a 4x4 drive down the backroads of the vineyard on tour to the tasting room. Once there, customers sample 14 or so different wines.

In 2015, Brian worked with Jones Brothers Marine in Morehead City, N.C., to develop the *Backwater*, a one-of-its-kind boat in North Carolina. Certified by the Coast Guard, the *Backwater* now takes up to 23 passengers on a journey across 4 miles of shallow Currituck Sound. "People are amazed to discover the sound is only 5 feet deep," says Brian. "We can do things other boats can't. And if you rent a pontoon or a Jet ski you have to navigate the shoals and avoid crab pots. People can come with me on a journey, avoid stress and just relax."

At first, Brian started the tour carrying only six passengers due to restrictions. But he worked closely with the Coast Guard to pass all certifications and tests required to carry up to 23 people. It was tough, but completing the rigorous qualifications allowed Brian to now offer a truly unique journey.

Starting May 15 and running through late September, the *Backwater* will make three to four trips per day on average from Monday to Friday every week. There are several different cruises to choose from, all offered through Kitty Hawk Kites – the Vineyard Voyage, the Eco Cruise and the Sunset Cruise. And the Thursday night Vineyard Voyage also includes an additional acoustic performance at the Cotton Gin, a sister store to Sanctuary Vineyards, with a beautiful sunset view on the return journey.

The tours pass by the historic Dews Island Hunting Lodge, where a dozen horses were relocated from Corolla. "They are truly wild now," says Brian, "since you need a boat just to see them." And passengers are treated to other wildlife as well. Says

And give Kitty Hawk Kites a call. Then, when you get back home, don't just tell everyone about the nice vacation you had. Tell them about the mermaids you transformed into, the wild horses you witnessed and the delicious wines you sampled with your new friends on the Outer Banks.



one customer, "Viewing Currituck Sound by boat was the highlight of our trip to the Outer Banks. We saw an osprey and its nest, blue herons lifting gracefully from the marsh with giant wings and wild ponies nibbling along the banks. Captain Brian's skills and knowledge of the history of the area make you feel at ease. This trip is a delight for all ages."

Brian says that he loves the diversity of the groups, from bachelorettes to retirees. "By the way back, everyone becomes friends with everyone else," he says. "And I just try to keep people happy, no matter what it takes."

For more information, head to Brian's Instagram page, @outerbanksboattours, or the website, [www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/duck-boat-tours](http://www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/duck-boat-tours).

# A BUFFET with a Mother's Heart

By Dave Holton

"I don't take any of it for granted."

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*

Liz Dowless runs Jimmy's Seafood Buffet from a room on the second floor of the restaurant, a modest space with a desk, a chair and a computer. On a cold, off-season day she layers up with an extra jacket to keep warm while she works. It's not what anyone would call a life of luxury.

So what is it, then, that Liz doesn't take for granted? It doesn't take long to figure that out.

When the mother of three talks about the journey she's made as the owner of Jimmy's Seafood Buffet – 18 years of labor, love and loss layered in equal measure – she's quick to shift the conversation away from herself to others. Her employees. Her customers. Her community. Her family.

"When we started, Jimmy's was a lot smaller, more of a typical buffet. But we set out to be different. We wanted the food to feel homemade, to avoid the canned stuff and to focus on flavor and quality ... and to focus on fun." She pauses, thoughtful, then smiles, again, as she repeats.

"We really wanted to focus on fun."

As she says the words, there's a touch of sadness that lies just a heartbeat behind her smile.

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*

But she continues.

"We just added an outside bar area," says Liz. "We are continually renovating and adding on. We also have fun promotions like Wild Wednesdays, where we do a wall of crab legs that includes local soft shells, local blue crabs and crabs from every coast. On top of that, we have all-you-can-eat lobster tail every Monday and Friday until 4 p.m. And if you want delivery or takeout, we have a whole separate kitchen for that. People love the clam bakes – they're especially popular."

And Liz doesn't stop there. Her enthusiasm fills the room as she describes more fun features.

"We have horse rides and a petting zoo. And we have a chalkboard up front where the customers can write messages and take pictures to send home to family and friends." She smiles as she says that last bit, the kind of smile that takes up her whole face. "It's exciting to see what people write, to see how creative people get."

Liz laughs both easily and often, which might lead you to believe that her journey has been easy. It hasn't been.

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*



In August of 2003, just months after Liz and her husband, Jerry Dowless, purchased the restaurant outright from their other founding partner, Jerry passed away unexpectedly. Liz was left the sole owner with the combined responsibility of running a restaurant and raising three young children alone.

Who would have blamed her for quitting? How could she "focus on fun" after such a tragedy?

But she didn't quit. She kept on, sticking to that original goal that she and her husband had once set to achieve together. And it turns out, she didn't have to go it alone after all. The members of this mother's work family are loyal indeed, a trait not always associated with the restaurant business.

"We have one waitress who has been with us since the beginning and a cook who has been with us for about 14 years. Most of our other employees have stuck with us for at least nine years, and we have students who come back to work with us summer after summer."

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*

And as Liz's children grew, they joined the business as well. "One of my sons, Jason, waits tables, and my daughter, Sophia, helps out as a hostess," says Liz. "And my oldest, Shane, well, he lives in Colorado now, but when he can, he comes back in the summers to help out."

Beyond her immediate family, Liz also relies on her extended work family across the Outer Banks community. "Everyone on the beach works together. If I need to borrow crab from Captain George's or Awful Arthur's they're happy to send it over, and I'll always do the same for them. Also, Jim [Douglas]

over at Chilli Peppers was our original business partner. He's where the name Jimmy's comes from. And the owners of Spanky's used to work for me, so we have a great relationship."

Liz does her best to support the local fishing community as well. "I buy whatever I can locally, from tuna to catfish. Whatever I can get is going to be on the buffet." If she can't get it locally – "Alaskan snow crab isn't exactly local to North Carolina," she says with a laugh – Liz makes sure to buy her seafood from the best possible sources, which requires keeping up her education. "I went to Boston last March, to the Boston Seafood Show, where I studied how seafood is sourced. I want to understand where my food comes from. If I won't feed it to myself, I won't feed it to my customers."

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*

Like any good mother, Liz wants her family to eat the best food possible. She cares more about providing her regulars with quality seafood than she does about pulling in more price-sensitive patrons through compromises. "The seafood industry is volatile. When they cut crab supply by 40%, the price shoots up. I could go somewhere else to get my crabs, but I don't want to cut quality."

Liz speaks fondly about her customers. "There's this one couple that comes all the way from Hatteras every Saturday and a family from Edenton that makes the trip from there to here and back again two to three times a week," says Liz. "And I get so many emails from people who book their vacations around when we open and close. Some people actually come back three times during just one week of vacation."

She loves getting emails from visitors and regularly responds to reviews on Facebook and TripAdvisor with personal messages. "I look through it all," she says. "It always makes me so happy."

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*

Liz still laughs as she remembers the days when some customers thought that Jimmy's Seafood Buffet belonged to a certain island escapist with a penchant for cheeseburgers and margaritas. "Early on, lots of people thought the restaurant was owned by Jimmy Buffett," she says. "People would always ask us why we weren't playing Margaritaville!"

No, Jimmy's Seafood Buffet is no Parrothead chain restaurant. Jimmy's Seafood Buffet is a family.

And behind the flavors and the fun that this family offers up at their buffet on the beach, there steadily beats the brave heart of one proud, yet ever-modest, determined mother of three, who thumped on through adversity and kept on smiling.

*t h u m p - t h u m p ...*



# Mozzarella AND Memories

By Dave Holton

**W**hy do we love pizza? Is it the dough? The sauce? The cheese or our choice of toppings? There's something more, isn't there? Something that goes deeper than the toppings and cheeses and crusts. And the owners of Tomato Patch Pizzeria and Bar in Corolla seem to know exactly what that something is.



Owners Linda & Lambros Vlahos

"On our honeymoon," says Linda Vlahos, "we went to Boston, and we got a pizza with garlic, pepperoni, and ricotta cheese." She laughs. "I can't remember the car we rented or where we stayed, but I remember that pizza." "Garlic, pepperoni, ricotta," agrees Lambros, grinning. "That was it."

Three decades later, they still remember. Lambros Vlahos doesn't wax poetic like Linda. "You won't get much out of me," he says. But he does have a bit of poetry in him when it comes to pizza. "Pizza is like music," says Lambros. "It has memories attached to it." And Linda knows how to get him going. "Just ask him about his pet peeve." She laughs, ready for the reaction she knows this will provoke from a man who holds his heritage close to his heart.

Lambros crosses his arms over his chest,

his muscles flexing. "We make Greek pizza," he says. "Greek. Many New Yorkers come here thinking that if it isn't New York-style pizza, it isn't pizza." Linda laughs again. "Don't get us

wrong," she says. "We love all pizza. When we go to New York, we get New York-style pizza. And we love it. But it's not our pizza. Not the pizza we make."

"Greek pizza is crunchy, not chewy," says Lambros. "And the toppings go all the way to the outside."

As he speaks, his hands play out the act of creation – kneading the dough, spreading the sauce, applying the toppings – and his eyes focus with the intensity of something felt. Something remembered. To Lambros, Greek pizza is more than just another style of pizza. To Lambros, Greek pizza is family. Greek pizza is a legacy. Greek pizza is the foundation on which he and Linda have built their lives.

Like so many of this country's entrepreneurs, Lambros was not made in America. At 8 years old, Lambros immigrated to the Outer Banks with his family. Back in 1974, when the turmoil between Greece and Tur-

key was happening, America had a more open-door policy on refugees. "The whole family got green cards," Lambros says. "I guess that wouldn't happen these days." Lambros grew up working for his uncle at Van's Pizza and then for his father at Kitty Hawk Pizza.

When Linda joined the family, she also joined the family business. After the couple had secured a loan from Currituck Bank – something they are thankful for, or as Lambros puts it, "who finances a kid out of college?" – Linda and Lambros built Tomato Patch Pizzeria in Corolla and

opened in May 1993. They served recipes passed down by Lambros' father. And the menu has grown with the restaurant. Now, in addition to

pizza, customers can enjoy Gyros, Buffalo Chicken Wraps, Greek Salad, Corolla Seafood Pasta and even Linda's delicious crab cakes. Or there's that drink at the full-service bar.

And in keeping with the Vlahos tradition, Lambros and Linda still blend work and family within the walls of the Tomato Patch Pizzeria. "Most of my family members have now worked here at some point and so have our kids," says Linda. "We have three boys, ages 22, 18 and 16, and they have all worked here, starting with bussing and dishwashing." She laughs, "They either learned that they hate it or they learned

**"Pizza is like music. It has memories attached to it."**



**Every Tuesday is "Kids Day"**



they love it. Now our middle son, Yanni, is going to Johnson and Wales culinary school in Rhode Island." With regards to the other two sons... "At least they learned Greek cuisine," says Lambros.

Since the Vlahos way is to treat family like employees, it's no surprise that the reverse is also true. "Working in a pizza restaurant isn't a career for most people," explains Linda. "Most of our workers are college-aged. Many are on J-1 visas. It can be tough because you are always training new people. But it's a fun, eclectic group. We have Romanian kids, Polish kids. And over the years, people have returned, sent relatives. We've had whole families work for us."

"Twenty-five years is a long time. Some of our employees who met here have ended up married with kids and businesses of their own in other places," says Lambros, smiling. He seems especially fond of their entrepreneurial employees. "They see a life here that they can't obtain in their own country, so they work hard, start their own businesses."

"We had one young man who told us he wanted to manage," says Linda, "so we sent him to ECU bartending school. Now, he owns Basil's restaurant in Greenville, a place that we originally built and then sold to him outright."

One of their current entrepreneurs in the making is Elena Rotari, who originally came from Moldova. She has been waiting and managing at Tomato Patch for five years now. "I've been attending COA for business, and I'd love to open my own restaurant. Lambros has been helping me develop my plan, and he even helped me with questions I should ask when I negotiate for the location."

And, like any good parents, they do more than just advise their young employees. "We are like a family," says Elena.

"One Thanksgiving, we cooked a sweet potato casserole for the European kids," Lambros laughs, "They didn't know what it was, but they loved it."

"And we do a whole seafood party during the summer since most of these kids can't usually afford to go out and eat seafood around here. We want to make

sure they get an experience," says Linda.

Though their own children are now grown, Linda and Lambros regularly fill their lives with the laughter of childhood – every Tuesday, the restaurant hosts a Kids Day. Elena describes the event. "It's a crazy day, kids everywhere, like a big party. They get chef hats and make little pizzas, and after they finish, we take the pizza back and cook it for them. It's so much fun." "We've been doing the Kids Day for 10 years now," says Lambros.

"Has it really been 10 years?" asks Linda.

Lambros laughs. "Years go by so fast. We judge a year by the end of the busy season, so it feels like a year is only a few months and then it's over and we're getting ready for next year."

Maybe that's why this couple can speak about their shared pizza nearly three decades later as though they just took their first bite together. Or maybe it's because it's not just about the dough and the sauce and the cheese and the toppings. Maybe it's about the hard work surrounded by family. Maybe it's about the many people who have come and gone and the experiences they've shared with employees and customers and each other. Maybe it's about the journey they've taken from there to here, then to now.

Or maybe it really is just about the pizza. "Hey. We love pizza, man," says Lambros. "That's it."



803 Albacore Street, Corolla • (252) 453-4500 • obxpizza.com