

A Fish in a Hurricane

By Dave Holton

It was a dark and stormy night

Hurricane Matthew wasn't supposed to hit the Outer Banks. According to forecasts, the storm would sweep into the ocean somewhere around the South Carolina border. By Monday, October 10, 2016, according to the experts, the seas around Hatteras would be calm, and the skies would be clear.

And by Monday, when the curfews for Dare County were finally lifted, the seas were indeed calm, and the skies were indeed clear. But everything else had changed.

Because Saturday morning, the storm slammed straight up the coast instead of turning out to sea. For 12 hours, Hurricane Matthew hammered beaches from Hatteras to Corolla with 15 inches of rain and 80 mph winds.

The *Outer Banks Sentinel* reported property damage totals around \$52 million. Parts of Highway 12 were gone. And in the middle of the destruction stood the water-logged shell of Red Drum Grille & Taphouse.

"A torrential downpour started around 10:30 p.m. or so," remembers Brian Brown, co-owner of Red Drum. "I saw the water coming up to the curb, but I thought we were okay ... that we would just get a wet floor." He shakes his head, his eyes cast to the floor as he focuses on a memory he'd just as soon forget.

"Then the wind started, around 3 a.m.," Brian says. "That's what killed us. Sustained winds of 80 miles per hour blew the water right down the road and into the buildings."

He sighs. "I've never seen water cover the beach road like that."

In the beginning

In 1984, when Brian moved from Winston-Salem, N.C., to help open the first JK's Restaurant on the beach, he was just 24. Like most 24-year-olds, he wanted to find the nightlife. But the Outer Banks was a different place back then. "It was like a ghost town," Brian says. "I rode out, looked around for a bar or a restaurant, and there was nothing. I thought, 'What have I done?'"

Luckily, the scene changed with the arrival of restaurants like Tortuga's Lie in 1989 and Rundown Café in 1993. Brian worked at Tortuga's as a bartender, and it was there that he met Craig Errickson. Craig was fresh from culinary school, and the two shared common restaurant-ownership aspirations.

Brian had developed a brew-house concept with two other potential partners. It was based on the beer-centric alehouses that were popular in other states, but Brian's idea was to also offer noteworthy food. However, the idea fell apart due to

North Carolina's complicated regulations about breweries at the time.

Undeterred, Brian kept searching for opportunities. When the building at milepost 10 on the beach road in Nags Head became available in 1998, he leapt and a storm of activity followed: "I got the building. I signed the lease while I was still at Tortuga's. I called Craig, who was at Rundown, and asked him if he wanted to start a restaurant. Then it all happened over night."

With some backing from friends and family, Brian and Craig opened their restaurant, naming it after the legendary fish that historically brought droves of fishermen to the Outer Banks. They remained almost true to Brian's original idea by creating a food-focused taphouse. "We were the first on the beach with 18 taps," Brian says.

The partnership had its growing pains. "There weren't any fist fights, at least," Brian says with a laugh. Both owners put in long hours for the first five years while getting established and settling into a groove.

All along they've kept their dedication to the food and added some refinements over the years. "Our original menu was crazy," Brian says. "We had bangers and mash and shepherd's pie!" Since then Chef Craig has fine-tuned the menu with Travis Markham, who's been at Red Drum for 10 years. "Travis is another culinary guy," Brian says. "He can cook anything from panzanella to etouffee."

Swimming through the storm

On Tuesday, October 11, 2016, Brian and Craig assessed the damage. "I was shocked because in 20 years we never had water in the building, and now there were 30 inches of water inside," Brian says. "But we decided to rebuild, to get it done and move on."

With the help of Ryan Brophy, a local jack-of-all-trades, they got to work. It took until mid-November to dry the building enough to rebuild. "Even the wait staff pitched in. We all got out the saws, cut out baseboard and tore out bathrooms," Brian says.

The restaurant community looked out for the folks at Red Drum. "We're technically competitors, but we support each other," Brian says. "Mark from Lucky 12, Mike from Rundown Cafe, Richard and Bob from Tortuga's, they all fed us. Mike brought us six bags of food one day."

He smiles appreciatively. "I kept telling my staff things could have been worse. We could have had 5 feet of water instead of 2.5, or the place could have burned down. Life is not that tough for us here. This wasn't life or death. This was a fix it and move on situation."

After an off-season of repairs, Red Drum Grille & Taphouse reopened on March 3, 2017.

Brian feels fortunate to have the restaurant open, and he's not alone. One customer wrote in a recent TripAdvisor review, "Glad to see Red Drum's back in business after Hurricane Matthew!"

Stop by Red Drum, and you'll soon understand why everyone's so excited that this fish survived the storm.



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RED DRUM
GRILLE & TAPHOUSE