



Stuart Diepold filets dozens of fresh swordfish steaks in preparation for the day's menu at Shark on the Harbor in Ocean City. STAFF PHOTOS BY JOE LAMBERTI

# 'We want them to feel like it was awesome'

Shark on the Harbor owners discuss their 'backwards' approach to the challenges of restaurant business

By Jon Bleiweis  
Staff Writer

WEST OCEAN CITY — In the wintertime at The Shark on the Harbor, unless you specifically ask for a slice of tomato on your sandwich, you're not going to see one on the menu.

Why? "It's not the best tomato we can find," said Travis Wright, chef and co-owner of the restaurant. "We serve sliced tomatoes with sandwiches in the summer, when they're great."

Wright and his fellow co-owner — his wife, Jody — say the key to operating a successful restaurant is to stay ahead of the game through hard work and making sure guests leave satisfied.

Their way to do so is to take what Travis calls "a backwards approach" to the restaurant's menu, which is written twice a day — for lunch and dinner.

In the restaurant industry, the common practice is to develop a menu, then source the ingredients for the created dishes. But at The Shark on the Harbor, it's reversed. Menu items are based on what comes goods come in from the 15 — and growing — local partners and farmers on a daily basis.

It's how they ensure patrons get the best quality food Delmarva offers.

"It's really just starting with all the best ingredients we could possibly get our hands on, and then letting the inspiration come from those and writing the menu items around what we're able to source, based on the season and availability," he said.

For example, the winter will bring a bounty of root vegetables and hearty greens, but not many crabs. Come spring, crabs will be plentiful, while in the summer, there will be plenty of tuna, mahi mahi, wahoo,

corn and, of course, those pesky tomatoes.

As a result, what's on the menu for lunch could be gone by dinner, if the very best of ingredients are not at the Wrights' fingertips.

"Sometimes, you have to sacrifice quality of ingredients," Jody said about buying food based on the menu. "We don't want to serve something that isn't meeting our highest standard all the time."

Once ingredients arrive, the restaurant's prep team will clean and wash them and get ready for one of the cooks to use.

On a recent Friday morning in the cozy kitchen, Travis led the culinary staff in preparing ingredients and dishes for the day as they made their way to several stations like a synchronized dance.

Travis Wright begins tasting a shrimp and andouille sausage gumbo that will complement a pecan encrusted golden tile and smoked tomato gravy — a dinner dish — along with prep cook Tyrone Finnikin to get feedback. The flexibility of the menu allows the staff to come up with on the spot improvisations in the restaurant's dishes.

"Before it was just sort of fell flat, but with a little bit of acid there you can really feel it right now," he said to Finnikin. "You know what this needs? Fresh chopped parsley."

Later on, while preparing for lunch service, the crew was debating what to name a flatbread pizza with duck, bacon jam, pork belly, salsa verde, tomato relish and a last minute addition of beef, before 50 copies of the menu were printed. Names such as "the family butcher" were thrown around the kitchen before Jody suggested "the protein powerhouse."

The unpredictable menu doesn't keep just customers and the kitchen

staff happy. The staff in the front of the house are always eager to talk about what's new on the menu, Jody said.

"I think the guests enjoy it, but I think the people who work here enjoy it, as well," Travis said about the restaurant's approach. "It keeps your job in the kitchen interesting, challenging and exciting when you know that you're going to be responsible for a dish or two or however many each night."

Meanwhile, Jody announced the winner of the restaurant's New Year's Eve photo contest on the Shark's Facebook page. Instead of simply saying what will be offered at the restaurant, Jody said she uses social media to take fans and followers behind the scenes of the restaurant, whether it's a profile a local farmer who contributes to the restaurant or a story on how some of the dishes have been created.

"Our followers and guests, they really do like to learn about that stuff," she said.

Over the summer, a new slogan for the restaurant was developed: Mindful eats and spirits. The philosophy behind the restaurant hasn't changed, but the phrase was a new way to describe what they have been doing for years.

The Wrights were able to execute this philosophy to the fullest once they downsized their restaurant and moved into its present space in 2007. From a business standpoint, Jody Wright said the location provides several advantages, from being smaller, to its proximity to the harbor and their 15 local farmers and partners — a figure that is growing.

"From a business standpoint, those buildings didn't fit the mindset," she said. "This one does."

In the seasonal Del-



Marlin Deacon spreads sauce on the "Protein Powerhouse" pizza, a special at Shark on the Harbor featuring bacon jam, salsa verde, tomato relish, duck, pork belly, and beef on naan.



Travis Wright, owner of Shark on the Harbor, prepares for a busy Friday in Ocean City.



Owner Travis Wright taste-tests the gumbo at Shark on the Harbor in Ocean City.

marva Peninsula, operating a restaurant that planned for four closed days in 2013 — Thanksgiving and Dec. 23-25 — may sound daunting. But given how the restaurant receives its ingredients on a daily basis, it would disturb the restaurant's rhythm and pace to be open for a few days a week then closed, Travis said.

So the Wrights do what they can to keep the summer momentum throughout the year. It's this approach that, in part, keeps the restaurant at capacity at 2 p.m. on a Thursday in early January — the dead of winter.

"We're not as steadily busy every night as we are in the summer time, of course," Jody said. "So that allows us to be more creative in the kitchen."

Monday night is pizza night, where a rotating menu of gourmet pizzas complements the full dinner menu. Wednesday night is wine and small bites, which features a tapas menu of small plates the culinary staff creates.

For the last three years, the restaurant hosts a Buy Local Monday Marketplace for the three Mondays after Thanksgiving, as a way to support local artists and give patrons a different and cre-

ative experience to enjoy. Travis will also host cooking classes in the winter.

The Wrights believe if a patron is going to come and spend money and time at their restaurant, which seats about 75 in the dining room and another 20 in the bar, that it was time and money well spent.

"We want them to feel like it was awesome," she said. "We want them to feel like it was a meal they couldn't have had at home and couldn't have had anywhere else."

jbleiweis@dmg.gannett.com  
443-210-8125  
On Twitter @JonBleiweis