

## ‘Life is not about burritos alone’

At Guapo’s, Kyle Parker believes in serving community as well as customers

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ORLEANS — From Cape Cod to Las Vegas, Biloxi to New York City and back to the Cape, Kyle Parker has worked all around the restaurant scene.

Now in his early 40s, Parker and his wife, Danna Perry, are the owners of Guapo’s Tortilla Shack in Orleans and Guapo’s Shore Shack in Brewster.

Parker said he found his niche working at Chillingsworth in Brewster, starting when he was 15 years old. He graduated from Nauset Regional High School in 1990 and continued working in local restaurants until 1993, when he took off for Vegas.

Over the ensuing years, he found his way into the casino business and worked with a number of famous chefs and restaurateurs, people he called “the rock stars” of food industry.

Parker met Perry in New York in 2000. When Sept. 11 happened the next year, hard times followed and, as restaurants struggled, the couple had a lot to think about. They eventually decided it was time to head back to the Cape, start a family and strike out on their own.

Now, with two locations and two children, Parker said it continues to be an incredible journey.

**What is the most important thing your business does?**

Our core value system is committed to keeping things simple, fresh and consistent. We struggle with the consistency part sometimes, but our commitment is to quality, fresh ingredients. We don’t spare any expense in the product, and I think that really speaks a lot to who we really are.

But life is not about burritos alone. The most important thing we do is engage our community. We started a program called Guapo’s Gives where we hold fundraisers once or twice a month to assist local nonprofits in their efforts. Our annual goal is about \$20,000, which I believe we meet readily.

**How long have you been in business?**

In 2005, we opened Guapo’s Taquería (now Guapo’s Shore Shack) right next door to the Brewster General Store. We were there for a year. Then I bought the building on Underpass Road and renovated that for a year.

We started off in Brewster year-round, but the real hard truth is that we weren’t making any money. It was my dream to be in business for myself and I quickly saw my dream disappearing. So we decided to go seasonal and supplement our income. I would take jobs on the side or on the off-season. Whatever I had to do to help our company stay alive, I did.

I worked at the (youth detention center) in Nickerson State Park. I also took a job at Atlantis in the Bahamas five years ago. I left my family here. My wife



Owner Kyle Parker, left, and chef Peter Glennon are seen in the kitchen of Guapo’s Tortilla Shack in Orleans. STEVE HAINES/CAPE COD TIMES

stayed and manned the counter while I went off to work. At that point I was so scared. You look at these two little kids. I didn’t have a trust fund or anything, so it was really up to me.

The next season, I took a job on the Vineyard running a couple of restaurants.

So we had the seasonal restaurant in Brewster (mid-May to mid-September) and decided to take what we learned in Brewster and open a full-service place in Orleans (in 2012) to try to enjoy a year-round job and income.

What we didn’t factor in was that a lot of the protocols and programs we built in Brewster didn’t work in Orleans. Brewster is 800 square feet. This is a 5,000-square-foot property. We were used to working in very confined spaces and all of a sudden we had all this room, extra staff and extra things that needed attention. We had to adjust and relearn again.

Some of it was very painful. At the end of the day, restaurateurs open restaurants because we want to make people happy. I really care about people and I don’t want to let people down. We let some people down here, some of our employees and some of our guests for sure.

But we’re back. We’re on top and we’re still learning.

**What did you do before?**

I grew up in Brewster from middle school on. I made some incredible friends here and enjoyed a lot of natural beauty, but when I was growing up I think I wasn’t getting enough

stimulation. For someone like me, where the wheels are always turning, that’s not good for anybody.

I struggled with my decision-making early on in my life. I graduated from Nauset High School in 1990 ... barely. I think they were happy to see me go.

I really grew up in the restaurant business. I worked at Chillingsworth in Brewster for years (starting in 1986). They instilled high standards and expectations in their team and something just clicked for me. My first bartending job was with Vern Smith at the Brewster Fish House around 1993. He wouldn’t accept anything less than a solid effort every day. He’s a great guy and it’s a great restaurant.

This industry gives you a lot of opportunity to travel and if you’re from a small town like Brewster and you have that opportunity to not take it is kind of foolish. I was fortunate enough to link up with some really talented guys that I idolized. I wanted to emulate them and enjoy the kind of success that they enjoyed.

**How big is your staff? Has your staff grown since starting out?**

Our seasonal staff peaks at 50 to 60 and our off-season staff runs about 15 to 20, depending on the time of year. That’s for both restaurants.

Our goal with this restaurant (Orleans) was to retain really solid, local year-round help, and we’ve been able to secure some really great people. We’ve lost some really great

people, too, but that’s the nature of the beast.

We’re probably about 15 percent higher staff here in the summer because we’re full service. My wife expedites the counter in Brewster and I expedite here in Orleans.

**How has the market changed since your business started?**

People are a lot more educated. You see Guy Fieri on “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives” and all this other programming on the Food Network and even PBS. Everybody’s doing it.

People’s expectations have grown. I don’t think most expectations are unreasonable. I just think that operating a restaurant and cooking on TV are so different. We’re cooking for 300 to 800 people a day between both locations and maybe 1,000 a day at peak season. You have to model your food after that.

**What are your plans for your business’ future?**

For these existing businesses, our goal is to keep them thriving and able to support the people who work here and allow them to have a quality of life that they can enjoy with their families.

There’s a lot of opportunity for growth and getting better at what we do. It’s just a question of which direction to go in. Making our own tortillas? If we can build a better tortilla than we can buy, then we can sell them to the other restaurants around here because everyone’s in the taco business today.

Or is it having a churros

(Mexican donut) factory? A food truck maybe? We do a ton of catering. We could expand on that. I can see another burrito shop in our future. What’s it going to be? We’re in the middle of trying to figure it out now.

**What’s your most memorable moment with this business?**

I’ve worked with a lot of celebrities. I’ll never forget the night I escorted Michael Jackson for about four hours everywhere he had to go. He had a broken foot at the time and he held on to my arm and I was talking to him the whole night. He was great, a really sweet guy.

In my own business, I think the most memorable day was when my kids told me they were proud of me. ... There’s no better feeling than when your kids say something like that to you.

**What advice do you have for someone starting out in business?**

What did it for me was when someone said, “Choose a job you like. You’ll never work a day in your life.” I believe that to be true. But the real practical side is make sure you have plenty of money and plenty of support. It’s hard enough and being underfunded is a struggle.

And dream big. I’m a dreamer. In my fantasy world, I think that what can happen in our business and what our legacy can be is pretty amazing. I probably won’t realize all of my dreams, but this is pretty good so far.

**What’s the biggest challenge about having a business on Cape Cod?**

When we first opened our business, at the end of the season, we had a pile of money, and I was pretty excited about that. But then we started paying the bills and we didn’t have any money left.

I didn’t understand how to plan ahead. That was really a turning point. With the seasonality of the business, if you’re not good at planning, you’re dead in the water.

The seasonality of the labor pool is part of that. We rely on J-1 visa students. We fly to Serbia every year and do job fairs there and hire anywhere from 15 to 20 Serbs to come here for the summer. They’re great kids.

**What’s the best thing about having a business on Cape Cod?**

To be able to have the fresh food that’s available to us here. Being able to be a part of a community that has such a high standard of freshness and products is really great. You don’t see that everywhere.

And the expectations that people have. It helps you to be better. They say if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere. I disagree. I think that if you can make it on Cape Cod, you can make it anywhere. It’s that type of environment. It’s very, very demanding and you have to do your best to rise to that expectation.

— Follow Lorelei Stevens on Twitter: @CCTLorelei.

## Tips from SCORE: Perspective from the pros

Cape Cod SCORE

**Question:** I hear lots of hints, tips and techniques from other businessmen and women at networking groups. What do the pros have to say?

**Answer:** Entrepreneurs who have made it big and continue to make it big offer simple advice that we’ve expanded on:

**Richard Branson: Learn from others. Take note of what has worked and what hasn’t.** Continue what you are doing by attending networking events to share your experiences with other business owners who are experiencing the same challenges you are to learn how what they did to

address them. Be a lifelong learner. Read as much as you can either in periodicals, in books, in newspapers or online. You can even learn by watching TV. Connect as many as possible to continue to learn.

**Magic Johnson: You have to be passionate about your business.** In order to invest the resources — human and financial — you need to have passion for the mission of your business. Starting-up and managing a small business is a 24/7 adventure and investment. Some part of everyday must be committed to the launch or growth of your business venture. In order to maintain the stamina that it

takes to achieve your business objectives you have to have passion. Deep, driving passion.

**Martha Stewart: You need a well-thought-out business plan that keeps you on track.** Many small business owners don’t think they need a plan. They just start. They have a truck, a trailer, two mowers, assorted tools and they are in the landscaping business. But no plan. They don’t know who their target audience is. They don’t really know how to reach them. They have not thought through where they are going to get their income and where the cash is going to go to support the business start-up. Business plans don’t have to

voluminous documents. They can be one sheet.

**Jim Koch (Boston Beer): Quality starts in your own commitment. Your commitment will provide continuous improvement.** “Quality” is an overused word to describe a business offering. Everyone claims to offer quality service or build quality products. It is the job of the business owner to set the standard of quality so that everyone who comes into contact with the business feels the “gold standard” of quality.

**Wolfgang Puck: Stick with your core knowledge.** One the most important lessons all business owners learn is to “stick to your knitting.” Know what you are good at. Know what

you are not good at. When you do that, your risk of taking on too much in areas for which you are not qualified is reduced. When you stick to your knitting, you stay focused, and staying focused is critical not only in the startup phase of your business, but throughout the life of the business. When you take on tasks that are not in your mainstream, you are taking unnecessary risks and diverting your resources to areas that might not pay off in the end.

**Jason Mraz: Ask for and take the advice of others.** Somebody someplace has gone down the same path you are going. Find them and keep them close

to you. SCORE’s mission is to mentor small businesses through the expertise of its mentors, who have decades of business experience. Having an advisory group made of the three or four business professionals is the best way to test your ideas.

Business ownership can be very lonely since there are few people you can rely upon for advice and counsel. Contact SCORE to form an advisory group or find a mentor to address the issues you are facing.

— Contact Cape Cod SCORE for free and confidential mentoring at 508-775-4884 or [www.capecod.score.org](http://www.capecod.score.org).