



HARRIS CRAB HOUSE: AN ENDURING FAMILY LEGACY CONTINUES

BY TEDDY DURGIN

Bill Oertel has worked for the family business for 35 years now. He grew up in it. And this year, he is its new, incoming President. That business is Harris Crab House & Seafood Restaurant, which is situated on the Kent Narrows Waterway just four miles east of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

Oertel's grandfather, Bill Harris, started the operation -- initially a seafood processing business -- 72 years ago. And for more than seven decades, Oertel said, "we've been in business on the Eastern Shore selling and buying seafood. Around 1980, he wanted a place where all of his grandkids could work. So, he started a little crab shack on the [front dock of the W.H. Harris Seafood Processing House] that had picnic tables and just sold crabs and shrimp. Pretty much all of his grandkids worked there and grew up there. Most of us haven't really left."

The old processing house, which indeed began operations in 1947, is still home to Harris Seafood Company LLC. But when Granddad was ready to retire years ago, Oertel's parents, Karen (Bill's daughter) and Art Oertel, and his aunt and uncle, Jerry and Pat Harris, bought the restaurant. Oertel noted. "In the early '90s, the family built a new, 450-seat restaurant and that's what stands today. We're open year-round, and we serve as much local seafood as we possibly can. It can be tough to get local crabs in the wintertime, but we do our best. Our recipes have been handed down from my grandparents and my great-grandparents, and that's how we operate."



Just because Harris Crab House has an almost total focus on seafood, that doesn't mean there isn't some thought given to the beverage component of the menu. "No surprise. Beer works well for us!" Oertel exclaimed. "Remember, though, we're a family restaurant, so we don't really pride or tout ourselves as, 'Come on down and make us your bar!' As best we can, we offer Maryland beers, and we carry the brands of our local distributors."

For Oertel, it's been more than a family affair. It's also been a love affair. "I met my wife at the restaurant," he said. "We got married there. She was a server, and I [chuckling] was a 'whatever in the kitchen.' . . . This past summer, we opened a coffee shop and dessert bar on the premises. We deal with Rise Up Coffee based out of Easton, and they have some of the best coffee around. We love to pare with local folks as much as possible."

And while Harris Crabhouse prides itself on being as much local as possible -- the business buys its seafood from approximately 350 local watermen and employs nearly 140 people from the community -- its clientele is diverse. "Many of our customers are folks who come across the bridge," Oertel noted. "They love the slower pace of the Eastern Shore. I would say half our customers are from the 'Western Shore.' We also have a lot of local folks, of course, who come to us for birthday parties, anniversaries, and other milestones. We're trying to promote more to Eastern Shore customers, mainly because the bridge is such a hassle right now."

He continued, "My favorite question is, 'Where are you guys from? What brought you over here?' Everybody loves to come over the bridge and just go, 'Ahhhh, I'm out of that rat race for a little bit!' We get so many different bus parties, too. A lot of them are from Baltimore, and a lot are from D.C. We have people who come down from Philadelphia and from Wilmington. We're the first Maryland seafood crabhouse that you run across when you're coming down from that way."

And as much as family, friends, and customers from far and near keep the business going, Oertel and his staff also get by with a little help from their friends in the business. Chiefly, the family's long-time affiliation with the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA) has paid dividends.

Oertel concluded, "I love how the MSLBA members stick together and help each other out. There is, of course, the political lobbying component that's good for everybody. My mother [Karen Oertel] was on the board for a long time, and she was very active. Our most recent [officer] would have been my cousin, our outgoing President Michael Harris. As I get my feet wet this year, I very much hope to participate in the administration end of the MSLBA. I look forward to it, in fact! Keeping a voice in Annapolis for the local, one-off type of restaurants ... that is a very important thing." ■



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