

Hard Work, Long Hours, Healthy Ingredients Make Shanty Secrets Bistro Successful

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DANVILLE, Pa. — Nestled along the countryside of Mayberry Township in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, Shanty Secrets is a bistro that adventurous food lovers have made ever-popular. It features locally farmed produce as well as a recreational cooking school, a meal-prep service and a catering business, located just seven minutes from the heart of Danville.

Bistro co-owners Kristian Adams and Zachary Weidner, who are partners in the business and in real life, decided to base the venue's name on family nostalgia. The site was formerly the Shanty Secrets craft store owned by Adams' grandmother Alice, who has now passed. The building sat vacant for many years, but with electricity and water already on-site, Adams saw it had potential. He approached his grandfather about the possibilities. Adams said that his grandfather was immediately supportive and assisted him in applying to the local zoning board.

"The name fits the building and it keeps that connection. My grandmother was a very talented artist," Adams said. "My art comes in food. I love that some of her legacy



Blood oranges and chocolate-chip loaf cake.



A sticky sesame cauliflower bowl.

goes on."

Both owners grew up in the area. Adams in Catawissa and Weidner in Berwick, and returned as young professionals after completing their respective educational degrees. Adams' culinary expertise came from attending Escoffier School of

Culinary Arts, where he currently is pursuing a second degree, in pastry. Weidner attended West Chester University, where he developed business and communications savvy.

Combining their skills in a business partnership has brought booming success to the Shanty Secrets bistro. In fact, Shanty Secrets was recently honored with the small business of the year award by the Columbia Montour Chamber of Commerce.

"It was a validation of the techniques that I use," Adams said. "It also makes the long hours worth it."

They often work 80 hours a week prepping food and cooking at the venue, then go home to do hours of book work, grocery orders, planning and reading cookbooks.

The seemingly nondescript outbuilding in which the business is housed is beautifully decorated inside. It seats up to 30 guests on the weekends. It is also the site of their gourmet cooking classes and meals-to-go service during the week, plus a catering business.

Guided Cooking Classes

Chef Adams offers three types of cooking classes to the public. One is an interactive class for up to 15 people on topics such as pizza, pasta and pierogies. Another is a one-on-one masterclass on a specific topic chosen by the client. The third is called "Dine and Demo," in which a small group of six people watches Adams cook a dinner from the hightop bar. The six diners then get to indulge in the finished foods.

When looking for inspiration for menus or cooking classes, Adams admits that he "loves a good cookbook."

"I am not a TV watcher, so I'll sit and read with a stack of cookbooks. I just ordered three more and I can't wait to dive into them," he said.

While the business sprouted in 2009, when Adams was just 21, he took time to travel to France and Italy. It truly took root in 2018 when he returned home once again. In 2019, Weidner came to a cooking class and, as he puts it, "I never left." He officially came on the payroll in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in October 2020.

Adams and Weidner say their business collaboration is truly 50-50. Weidner is a self-described jack-of-all-trades — he designs the menus, posts on social media, serves at the bistro on the weekends, does dishes, and acts as a sous chef during the week. Adams provides the culinary expertise and savvy, and creates the weekend menus. They are hoping to bring on another employee to keep the momentum of the business moving forward in a sustainable way.

Shanty Secrets is located next to the home of Adams' grandfather, Orville Shultz, who is a local farmer and township supervisor. Shultz grows much of the fresh produce that goes into the bistro's menu, including peppers, tomatoes, squash and corn. The other produce comes from neighboring D&D Shultz Farm, owned by Adams' Aunt Diane and Uncle Donnie. They provide items such as fresh berries, squash and asparagus to name a few. Adams and Weidner contribute to the menu cornucopia by growing their own herbs, like basil, lavender, thyme and edible flowers such as nasturtium and pansies.

What Adams and Weidner are not able to procure from family members or grow themselves, they buy from Davy's Fresh Market in Lewisburg or similar farm markets that have a standard for high



Submitted photos

Shanty Secrets' bistro features freshly ironed black linens, fine china, fresh flower arrangements and polished silverware.



From left, chef Kristian Adams, his mom Jean Adams, and Zachary Weidner before a weekend meal service at Shanty Secrets.



A fresh charcuterie board greets guests at the Secret Shanty bistro in Danville, Pa.



Homemade vegan pizza from the pizza class at Shanty Secrets.



An upgraded Caesar salad adorned with orchids as a finishing touch.

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quality.

Adams said that his culinary point of view is to taste something different in each bite. He enjoyed hearing a bistro customer describe it as: "Each bite is something new, but the other flavors are in the back, blooming."

"My favorite thing to prepare is something that gives me a challenge (like wild boar)," Adams said. "In terms of fresh produce, I like the end of spring and beginning of fall, because you get fruits and veggies that are so colorful, and you can utilize them in such a way that people aren't used to. I am all about depth of flavor in my cooking."

Providing Healthy Meals, To Go

Weidner's first contribution to the business was focusing on vegan and gluten-free offerings. He suggested offering a weekly meal-preparation service to provide healthy options for the region's many doctors, nurses and hospital staff.

"I made the case for the fact that there is a multi-million campus (Geisinger) that's in this town," Weidner said. "Doctors, nurses and residents come from urban areas where they are primarily vegan and vegetarian."

The weekly, healthy, meal-prep services range from \$10-15 each and have found a unique niche in central Pennsylvania. The meal-prep menu, which changes weekly and is announced on Facebook and via text message to customers, offers a convenient way to taste something new.

"We send a personal text message to about 150 customers, and every week we have at least

one-third or one-quarter place an order. If everyone responded, we wouldn't be able to serve them all," Weidner said.

Current meal-prep foods include items like a barbecue lentil loaf and mashed potatoes; a sticky sesame cauliflower and basmati rice bowl; a vegan "sloppy Joseph" sandwich; corn and potato chowder with an oat-based creamy broth; and a blueberry and roasted beet salad.

The prepared meals are paid for when ordering and must be ordered 24 hours in advance, for pickup on Tuesdays or Wednesdays.

The prepared meals have led to many repeat customers.

"We saw an uptick of returning clients," Weidner said. "They would come for meal-prep for a few months, then make a dinner reservation or come to a cooking class."

"At the height of our meal-prep, before we had to scale it back, it was taking over our lives. It started out as a part-time thing to pay me, and we were doing it for 75 hours a week, apiece. It was very unsustainable," Weidner said.

"We were putting out 200 meals — sometimes 100 meals a day with just the two of us. We scaled it back to just Tuesday and Wednesday (from four days a week), because we were busy on the weekends (with the bistro), too. We were getting there at 8 in the morning and not leaving until midnight every day. It just got to be too much," Weidner said.

Upscale Dining on Weekends

On the weekends, Shanty Secrets offers an "elevated" bistro experience. The menus are something that you might see in an upscale restaurant in Miami or New York City. The plates boast new interpretations of ingredients like asparagus cream or champagne vinaigrette. There are unusual fla-

vor combinations like filet mignon with espresso and white chocolate sauce, or harissa-mint sauce on a leg of lamb.

Tables are reservation-only and often sell out within 24 hours of the Facebook announcement.

When guests arrive, they are greeted by both Weidner and Adams, and the chef takes the time to explain the menu to each table.

One of the partners' favorite stories to tell is the customer who told them that he "hated cantaloupe" when he saw cantaloupe gazpacho on the bistro menu. But, by the end of the dining experience he told them he would eat it every day. In fact, it is not unusual for customers to come in to the bistro saying that they hate Brussels sprouts, asparagus and beets, for example, but to change their minds after sampling Adams' dishes.

The restaurant's five-course, \$65 per person meal is typically a two-and-a-half hour dining experience, but the atmosphere is not stuffy. Patrons are encouraged to "come as they are" — to dress up if they want to, or wear jeans.

While the bistro comfortably provides vegan dishes, the chef generally doesn't offer tofu or seitan, but instead focuses on legumes, veggies, fruits and grains. The pair has created their own meat-alternatives for the meal-prep offerings including a faux-chicken cutlet made with almonds and cannellini beans, and bacon made from coconut flakes.

In April, Shanty Secrets will hold a themed dinner that highlights the last meal served on the Titanic. At the time of the reservation, each person will be given the name of a real Titanic passenger and during dessert the chef will reveal if they made it off the boat alive or perished.

The restaurateurs' future plans include fortifying the groundwork of what they are already offering and crafting a unique outdoor space, possibly using old farm wagons as enclosed seating areas. Eventually, they'd like to turn the property's farmhouse into a bed-and-breakfast or install a commercial kitchen to expand their catering side.

For more information, visit ShantySecrets.com or search for it on Facebook.

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