



Established in 1884

www.thesmstar.com

ST. MARYS STAR

Vol. 134 No. 81

Wednesday, October 7, 2020

TRADITIONAL MEETS ECLECTIC, CURBSIDE

By HOLLY HOLLENBECK
holly@emporia.com

Food has always been an important part of Bobby Santacroce's family's life. His Italian grandparents taught him almost everything he knows about cooking.

"They had a huge influence on food with me," Santacroce said. "I don't have any formal training. Everything I know has been taught to me by my grandparents or I have taught myself. Now, my work ethic and business sense I got from my parents."

Santacroce, an East Coast Connecticut native, moved to St. Marys in January of 1991. He worked for the Onyx Collection Company for several years but by his early 30s he knew it was time to try something new. His love of food was too strong to resist any longer.

"Nothing against The Onyx Company," Santacroce said, "but I didn't want to work for anyone anymore. And I knew that if I didn't do it at that time in my life I wasn't going to do it."

So he started looking into how to set up a food truck business. He said K-State programs that he took advantage of played a big role in supporting him during the beginning. With their help Big Boyz BBQ was born.

He started entering his BBQ into local contests to try to get noticed and get some traction in the industry, but he didn't have immediate success.

"There are so many BBQ places here in the area so there is a lot of competition," Santacroce said. "BBQ is a very regional and cultural type of food and varies depending on the region of the country you are in. Being from the East Coast I have a different take on BBQ. To me BBQ is more than just Pulled Pork and Brisket."

So Santacroce decided to diversify his menu some. He came up with a few signature tacos that were just a bit different from your typical taco such as a chimichurri steak taco, smoked salmon fish taco and a jamaican jerk chicken taco. The tacos quickly became a big hit.

"My signature tacos are what put me on the map," Santacroce said.

They were his big breakthrough. Two years into selling food out of his truck, he felt secure enough to quit his job at the Onyx Collection to pursue the food industry full time.

That was six years ago. Since then he has changed, added and perfected the food that he serves. And his new company, Bobby's Food Company, was born.

He still has some BBQ items on his menu, and he said his tacos are still one of his top three sellers. "They are on there because I can't take them off," he said of their popularity with his customers.

Another top three seller, his Philly Cheesesteak, is now even more popular than his tacos. "My tacos put me on the map," Santacroce said, "but my Philly Cheesesteak is what has kept me there."

He said his white cheddar mac & cheese, a newer menu item, is probably his current third best seller. "The people have really started to go crazy for it," Santacroce said.

He also serves a few more sandwiches including a Chicken Philly, along with a few pasta dishes that reflect his Italian heritage. And you can't forget a few good sides, including cheesy potatoes, a spicy slaw and his version of potato salad among others.

When deciding what to include on his menu, Santacroce said he just includes what he likes to eat on the menu and others seem to like it too.



He takes his food truck to lots of places. He says his customer range covers Northeast Kansas, and he thinks of Shawnee County as his food truck's homebase these days. The main place he parks his truck is in Topeka, but he is no stranger to Manhattan, Salina, Emporia. He said he still enjoys going to the smaller towns closer to home too such as Rossville, Emmett and of course his own hometown of St. Marys.

"I like to give back locally," Santacroce said. "Sometimes we break even or take a small hit at a venue but most of my advertising comes by word of mouth and referrals so it is worth it."

It's these towns who helped him get to where he is now.

"Without the local support I got in the beginning, I wouldn't be here today," Santacroce said.

And he said it was St. Marys residents that also kept him going during the lockdown. He lost many jobs and events during that time, so he decided to try something new.

"I don't normally work on Sundays," he said, "but during the lockdown I would open up in St. Marys on Sundays so they could take some food home with them. And people came out of the woodwork to support me—every Sunday for dinner. It was very humbling. They helped me out when I needed help."

Now that things are opening up a bit he is starting to hit his stride again. He's got some more irons in the fire.

Bobby's Food Company offers his food through more venues than just his food truck. He caters for many different venues including corporate events, private parties, weddings, tailgating events and community events. These events are starting to pick back up.

Santacroce said he likes to under promise and overdeliver no matter if he is serving food from his food truck or at a catering event. He said he likes to focus on the quality of the food and customer service.

He must know the right formula because he has gained more recog-



COURTESY PHOTOS



ognition recently by being named one of the people's choice top five food trucks in Topeka.

His recent success has also led him to start a second food truck with new menu items.

"I've gutted the new truck already," Santacroce said, "and I'm putting on the finishing touches right now."

He's still working on the menu

but was hoping to have a slow roll out last weekend with the new truck to see how it goes.

"I'm really excited about it," he said. "It's going to have a rotisserie cooker and a charcoal grill on it. This truck will have more of a grilled and deep fried menu."

Burgers, chicken, Italian sausages and grilled veggies will most likely make up the menu but he

wants to test it out first to see what is popular before he has too set of a menu.

His love of food and seeing people enjoy it is what keeps him going and coming up with new ideas about how to serve his customers better.

"I love food," Santacroce said. "I want people to experience what I can give them. I love seeing people's reaction to my food."

