

PT’s popular food truck opens doors to brick-and-mortar

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It took me three tries to catch Mike and Heather Harbin, owners of Mo-Chilli BBQ, because every time I visited their newly opened brick-and-mortar off Sims Way, they were inundated with eager costumers.

Since they moved from their long-standing food truck eatery into the house next door (previously Metro Bagel) Wednesday, March 9, the couple has seen plenty of business. Mike poured me coffee in a to-go chili container and we leaned on brand-new butcher blocks in the back. The kitchen was sparkling, everything gleamed with newness, but the place smelled richly of food that could only come from well-earned, long-perfected recipes.

Mike put in the time to get that recipe before opening Mo-Chilli in 2015. In his nine-year service with the Marines, he missed the Texas home-cooking he grew up with. “You know, one of those things that was always around when I was young was BBQ; that’s what I was used to,” he said.

So he tried to bring home to the Marines, which turned out to be a long process of trial and error.

“I tried to make my own and thought clearly, ‘I’m not doing something right.’ I kept trying and trying.”

He laughed off some of the rounds that leaned more towards error.

“You really find out who your friends are when they don’t go back for seconds.”

Luckily for his friends, neighbors, and for Port Townsend he eventually got it right.

“It just took a lot of head-banging, just grinding to get the flavor where I wanted it and the flavor we have today, it’s just a result of me chasing a flavor — I have no idea how it came to pass,” he said.



Mike and Heather Harbin, owners of Mo-Chilli BBQ, stand at their new location. Leader photo by Audrey Rogers

Mo-Chilli

Mo-Chilli is a fast-casual BBQ restaurant at 1980 West Sims Way in Port Townsend, open 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday. Call for more information at 360-774-6627

He was a good judge of BBQ after growing up with constant samples his dad would bring home.

“Every time I take a bite of BBQ, I remember places my dad took me where he used to help out or he’d bring home BBQ and it’d be awesome.”

Later, he knew he had finally captured that greatness at a funeral. He sat with family around a table, everyone chatting. When his BBQ was passed around, everyone was quiet. Sometimes food really is what we need, especially when it means home. He thought, this is it, “You can’t just get this anywhere.”

From the Marines, working with Carolina pit BBQs at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station, Mike went back to Texas and kept working with the process and with the recipe.

He started simply enough, yearning for that taste he had in mind, looking to feed friends and family, until a

neighbor gave him a book on starting a business. He encouraged Mike to take things further.

When Mike took his meats to a cook-off, he ended at \$95 over cost by the end of the day. That \$95 went back to making more BBQ, which would turn into an every-weekend-driveway event.

Next time you pass their food truck, look for a 95 painted on the side: It’s a reminder of where they started, and how far they’ve come.

When Heather’s dad passed, they knew they needed to leave Texas and return to her hometown, Port Townsend, to be with her mom. They quit their corporate jobs, sold the house, and used the money to start the business, converting their trailer into a food truck.

Today, the Mo-Chilli process is something of a secret. Only Mike knows when that

mark is hit.

While he’s protective of his life’s work, that doesn’t mean he has any less respect for his right-hand staff.

“It takes a special person to want to come and light up a pit at a BBQ place in the morning; those guys or girls don’t just fall off trees,” he said, adding that when they’re “up at 2 or 3 in the morning, lighting the pit, and start cooking, you really do a lot of soul searching, you get in your own head sometimes.”

It’s been a challenge at times to keep going over the past two years. Not only is a 2 a.m. wake-up a tough ask, but the pandemic has reared its head in difficulty with staff shortages, especially over the winters. They’ve also had to shut down for burn bans and meat shortages. Their generator was stolen, and a replacement is on backorder.

“It’s been one blow after another,” Mike said. “We built this during a pandemic, that has to stand for something.”

Despite setbacks, they’ve operated out of the trailer as consistently as possible while they renovated the



Mike Harbin shows off his homemade pit at his new brick-and-mortar eatery. Leader photo by Audrey Rogers

restaurant.

“Every dollar that went in that window just came right in this door,” he said. “Hopefully we can put a tourniquet on that blood loss soon.”

They’ve been resourceful where they can be, like BBQ-ing in an old propane tank, hot with wood straight from Texas, sweet smoke roiling from its belly when Mike lifts its doors, which rest against old railroad stakes lining the top.

The tank sits out back, between the little building and a fresh fence. Mike and Heather and I stand out of the late winter drizzle,

marveling at the pit.

This is when Mike really gets excited. If his passion wasn’t clear before, it really shines out back as he shows off the tank, the stacks of logs from his home, and describes all of his plans for the space, including the soon-to-be reservation-only outdoor chef’s table area, “with flowers on the tables and everything,” he said, smiling.

I’d shy away from anyone who wouldn’t call that first-rate dining. Plus, a point should be made: Mike’s late father-in-law loved his BBQ and ate it every time he’d visit. He was a vegetarian.

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