

Clarks— old school burgers and shakes

Restaurant's owner Kathy Kalkwarf keeps the same standard for her homemade meals after 26 years.

By Matthew N. Wells
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Clarks Restaurant has flourished because of hard work, familial ties, and a dedication to keeping the food quality the same — delicious.

Just try the milkshake, double dog dare you.

The high standard Kathy Kalkwarf, who owns the restaurant, has kept the restaurant close to the hearts and stomachs of its longtime customers for the past 26 years. Clarks is open seven days per week, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. They serve via dine-in, take-out — there's a drive up window, or outside seating.

After Kalkwarf and her late-husband Rich Pacana bought Clarks Restaurant in 1997, they got to work on some serious renovations. They worked through the winter and then opened during Memorial Week-end of 1998.

“When we renovated, we put the whole neighborhood to work,” Kalkwarf said as she named a couple of the workers involved.

“All these neighbors who could do plumbing, (electrical). ... We tried to put all local people to work doing this. It was in such bad shape.”

Not taking the easy route

To this day, Clarks Restaurant — 731 U.S. Highway 101 — makes its own food. And they do it with local people. Kalkwarf doesn't cut corners to make tasks, or recipes easier. She pointed to one of the breakfasts for which the restaurant is known.



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Kathy Kalkwarf, owner of Clarks since 1997 — It reopened in 1998 keeps a photo album full of images that show former staff, the renovations the restaurant needed when Kalkwarf and her late husband Rich Pacana bought the place, and the old way Clarks used to look.

everything on the menu, and how they'll keep coming back.

With those milkshakes, how can anyone deny themselves a trip back? And if milkshakes or a wide selection of pop aren't your thing, they also sell local craft beer such as Steam Donkey Brewing Co., out of Aberdeen, and wine.

Given Kalkwarf's resistance to changing the way Clarks Restaurant operates, it seems those long-time customers will keep returning. And they'll bring their friends. The staff is partially made up of the happy, young customers who grew up, which shows the community's appreciation for Clarks. And judging by a recent lunch rush, the restaurant is doing just fine.



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Andrea Plummer, who's worked at Clarks Restaurant for 15 years, first experienced Clarks as a young customer. She said she was “knee-high.” Plummer seen serving up a homemade ice cream cone is one of the friendly people who work at the restaurant with roots in the 1920s.

“We make our own biscuits and gravy,” Kalkwarf said of one of the near countless homemade menu items.

“We just have simple recipes.”

Some people think what makes a restaurant successful is a bunch of fancy tricks, but sometimes all people want is a comfortable place where they know they can get good food. It seems Clarks is the latter. When Kalkwarf isn't working on her famous, homemade pies, she comes in for the Reuben sandwich and the potato salad as a treat.

“I've had a lot of people tell me it's the best Reuben they've ever eaten,” Kalkwarf said.

One table full of hungry customers said how they visit Clarks once per week and sometimes twice a week. They said how they've tried just about

Clarks Restaurant succeeded through tougher times too.

The restaurant survived the COVID-19 pandemic. When the restaurant had to stop its in-seat dining, Kalkwarf added a “carhop” element. She remembered announcing on Facebook how Clarks was staying open with that new element. She said the Facebook post got 26,000 “hits,” which she said referred to the shares, likes, loves, etc. ... And like the Facebook post, Clarks was a hit, even during the pandemic.

Kalkwarf talked about what makes Clarks Restaurant a place to drive to. It’s in the unincorporated Artic neighborhood, which is six miles south of Aberdeen and a few miles south of Cosmopolis. And it’s easy to spot just off the winding U.S. Highway 101 South.

More keys to success

“We don’t scrimp on anything,” Kalkwarf said. “When the prices started going up on the product and everything, we chose to scale up our prices accordingly. The old prices kind of went out the door because the cost went so high. But, if you notice at other places their burgers (shrank). Everything shrank. We refused to do that. Our product is the same today as the day we opened in 1998.”

The level of detail Kalkwarf and her small crew of servers and grill cooks puts into the restaurant is admirable.

Kalkwarf, who earned her business degree years ago, knew when she started that the restaurant business was a tough nut to crack. She said one statistic that has stuck in her head since then is the industry, at that point, had an 85% failure rate. And now, after 26 years of being open, she’s still doing what she can to make sure Clarks keeps pressing its lean ground chuck burgers, making its homemade ice cream, flavoring its popular clam chowder and the “Kathy’s Special Veggie Salad” for many more years. This is her formula for success and it’s worked, so why change it?



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If you’re in need of a place with good food and comfortable surroundings, Clarks is one of many places Harborites, and out-of-towners, can choose. At this place, you’ll find old decorations and fun atmosphere. You’ll also find hearty, homemade meals that keep people coming back.



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James Covault, grillcook, seemed to be in good spirits when he gave a brief soundbite as to how it is at Clarks Restaurant. “It’s a real community here,” Covault said after he finished cooking this homemade bacon cheeseburger.

And the work didn’t start with cooking the meals, serving the frosty chocolate milkshakes, making the ice cream from scratch, nor did it start with the fun chats with customers.

“It needed so much work,” Kalkwarf said about renovating Clarks through the winter months in 1997. “We have pictures over there. There’s a whole book because the first couple of months after we bought it, Rich was still in L.A. I was sending him pictures of the restaurant as people were working on it and what it was like. You could see how bad it was.”

The work included the exterior, the interior walls, the flooring, cleaning with a lot of Simple Green All-Purpose Cleaner, and just making the place better.

“We had to dig a well, here’s Pete Smith, the well-digger,” Kalkwarf said. “Everybody said ‘oh you can’t get water there,’ but he did. This is what the floor used to look like. The challenge was bringing it back to life without changing it. You understand what I mean?”

Kalkwarf talked about an experience at a hardware store when she and Rich argued about the lighting. He wanted newer, fancier technology to light the place. She said ‘No,’ and they left frustrated with each other over the issue. But she was right.

“The day that we opened and the people walked through the door and looked around, they said ‘Oh good, it’s the same.’ Why? Because those lights were still there,” Kalkwarf said. “At that point, (Rich) understood how important those lights were. It’s those little things. Just like we didn’t change the paneling, but we sure used a lot of Simple Green on it.”

But Clarks Restaurant wasn’t always Kathy’s place. It started in the Artic neighborhood in 1923 as a gas station, tavern and grocery store, according to the restaurant website. Back then Clarks was known for their “memorable Friday night dinners — especially with their homemade ice cream.” It’s what Kalkwarf, who worked at Clarks as a potato peeler for one year when the original owners ran the establishment, is proud to continue to bring the area.

She couldn’t do it without her staff

“I just have the best people, I kind of adopt them,” Kalkwarf said. “My daughter works for me. ... I have my grandson that works. I have another grandson who works too. ... And I’ve got Andrea (Plummer) who’s here. She’s worked for me for like 14 years. She was a neighbor girl.”

Kalkwarf said she hires the people who live near Clarks.

“The kids who go to North River get the first whack at a job,” Kalkwarf said. “I try to fill with them. Debbie lives right down at the Artic Park. Andrea’s parents still live out here, but she lives just over the hill in Cosi.”

And now, Kalkwarf hires the children of former staff and the people who ate at Clarks as kids.

Staff comments

Plummer talked about working at Clarks.

“I think it’s really amazing,” Plummer said. “I grew up like five minutes that way. They’ve known me since I was like knee-high. I started working here when I was about 21 and I am 36 now. It’s been a good 15 years. I love it.” Plummer said she’s “met a lot of good people here,” including people from “way back” with whom she’s been able to keep in touch.

As a recommendation, Plummer sold Clarks’ peanut butter milkshake and their Reuben sandwich.

Extended family affair

Despite various roadblocks, deaths of beloved staff and family members, paying off the renovation costs, surviving the pandemic, and fighting through the changing economy that’s making supplying the restaurant harder, Kalkwarf is still enjoying what she does, especially since she loves her customers. That’s not a cliché.

“My longtime customers are family too,” Kalkwarf said. “There have been many, many customers who I’ve gone to their funeral. That’s how I feel about my customers. And my crew feels that way too. You get attached to your customers and I thank them, every single one of them.”

Kalkwarf talked about the “helicopter lady,” Natalie, who was a flight nurse from Harborview Hospital. She flew from Harborview to Alaska for 30 years.

“They’ve been coming here for the (entire) 26 years,” Kalkwarf said. “Whenever there was an issue with my parents, or whoever, then I call her. ‘(Hey) Natalie, what about this?’”

And it sounded like the customers relate to Kalkwarf and her staff the same way, even staying at a hospital with Kalkwarf’s family during a tough time.

“We love our customers, we love our customers,” Kalkwarf said. “We care about them a great deal, every one of them.”



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Deborah Hughes, holding two well-stacked bacon cheeseburgers fresh off the flat-top, is one of the friendly faces at Clarks Restaurant. Kathy Kalkwarf wanted to feature her staff, which is why she’s not pictured. She knows she couldn’t have operated such a successful business without her staff.

James Covault, who was making a bacon cheeseburger at the time, summed up the main reason for Clarks’ success in its small area of Grays Harbor County.

“It’s a real community out here,” Covault said.



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Make sure to slow down before following the simple message “Eat.” Clarks Restaurant — 731 U.S. Highway 101, six miles south of Aberdeen in the Artic neighborhood — comes up quick on the winding, hilly highway. But if you follow the message, you probably cannot go wrong. There’s a large ordering board inside that is taller than grown adults in order to show the near countless homemade menu items available.