



KOCO'S PUB

ALMOST 40 YEARS IN, AND SELLING MORE
CRABCAKES AND COCKTAILS THAN EVER

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

John and Joanna Kocovinos opened Koco's Pub in 1985. Everyone knew John as "Mr. Koco," so it made sense to endear his new business on Harford Road in Baltimore to the masses with the nickname on the sign out front. The couple's dream was a modest one: operate Koco's as a little, neighborhood "hole in the wall" pub that served Joanna's food, specifically her crabcakes.

Today, their daughter Marcella Knight owns and operates the place, which is the latest to be featured in our ongoing series of articles on bars, restaurants, or taverns in and around Maryland named after their owners. Having grown up in the business, Knight fondly recalls,

"My mom would go to the store every day and pick up a few items to cook, and we'd have a little menu board and she'd write whatever she purchased that day. That's what she would sell for the day. She started making crabcakes, and we'd have a small, tabletop pizza oven that we used to cook them in. We could only cook four crabcakes at a time. I think we sold maybe 12 crabcakes a week back then."

Today, Koco's Pub sells well over 2,000 crabcakes a week! They even ship them all over the country to people who used to be local and still crave Joanna's original recipe (or to people who have heard about how tasty the cakes are and can't make it to Baltimore). As the crabcake making has expanded, so has the pub. A major kitchen installation and upgrade eventually followed, along with a dining room remodel. Before, the space had just a couple of tables and a couple of pool tables.

What's also grown has been Koco's Pub's reputation for customer

Marcella Knight
owner and operator
Koco's Pub



service and good times. Knight said in her recent interview with the Beverage Journal, "I tell my employees all of the time that we have so many good Google reviews and on all of the other social media outlets. So, it's a big responsibility to live up to the hype. People come here and have high expectations. We want everybody to leave here having their expectations met or exceeded. It's not an easy thing to do."

She continued, "Social media is what really expanded our business. We never really do any advertising except on those very rare occasions where we've bought an ad in a magazine. All of our business has been word of mouth and social media. Our first website was actually done by a friend, who was a computer person, as a Christmas present."

Koco's Pub is indeed known for its crabcakes. But the drinks menu has also evolved to be one of the city's best. Margaritas are the big favorite among locals. But Koco's craft cocktails are now drawing rave reviews, too.

"We have hired a bartender/manager, Rob Vogel, who has created lots of craft cocktails," Knight said. "He's incredible. When Rob comes up with



SHOW MORE
TO SELL MORE

- ➔ Solid Shelves
- ➔ Maximum display
- ➔ Edgeless Doors
- ➔ Maximum efficiency

3141 Frederick Ave. Baltimore MD | 410-945-7878 or 800-848-7748 | careysales.com



new recipes, he actually trains our staff in the drink making. Every new cocktail he has us sample first so we can describe it accurately to customers. He came to us from The Atlas Group. He came during COVID. We're closed on Sundays and Mondays. We don't keep late hours. Rob was tired of working late hours and not getting home until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. Our business fit better with his lifestyle. And we were lucky to get him because he is so highly trained."

Working with Vogel is one of the favorite parts of Knight's job, right up there with the customer interaction. But, of course, there are downsides. "We're a small place," she noted. "People want us to expand all of the time. We have really no parking. It's amazing that people still come from everywhere just to eat and drink here. Even where there is no parking, they manage to get in here . . . somehow! And people bring in their family and friends and grandparents from out of town. We're just one of those small, little places that people like to find and claim. They really appreciate that the owner is here working every day. Our employees tend to stay because we treat them like family. It means a lot to our customers."

What Knight tries to do is what Vogel has done: minimize the stress that comes with working in the high-pressure, high-performance hospitality and service sector. She

stated, "You have to have a balance in your life. It just can't be work, and that's one of the reasons why we're closed a couple of days a week. You need to have that balance in your life with family, with fun, and with work. We close twice a year for vacation, and some people look at us like we're crazy. But you know? We've found that creates such a demand! People will come in before we close because they know they won't have their crabcakes for a week. And then when we come back, they all come in to hear about our vacation . . . and get their crabcakes! So, it's not just our employees who have become like family. So have our customers."

Still, Knight acknowledges the challenges faced by anyone reading this just starting out as a proprietor or dreaming of running their own bar or pub one day. She saw them first hand with her dad and mom, both of whom are still alive. "Oh, you have to be dedicated," she said. "There will be a lot of things you give up in your life to run a business like this. For many years, weddings, parties, all sorts of celebrations that happened on Fridays and Saturdays had to be missed. You don't get to participate in those things. But you build your life around your business. And, in the end, it is VERY rewarding!" ■

