

TASTES OF THE CAPE

KEVIN MINGORA
PHOTOS/
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Dana Tillman, co-owner with her husband, Arthur, of Dana's Kitchen in Falmouth, prepares a fresh corned beef with cole slaw, swiss, and Russian dressing on rye sandwich. The Tillmans are growing their business by finding out what the community wants and expanding into catering.



The author recommends chicken stew with a buttermilk biscuit if you find yourself at Dana's Kitchen on a chilly day.

DANA'S KITCHEN

Making a restaurant business work

About the author

Becky Sue Epstein is an experienced restaurant reviewer and wine writer who has found her time on Cape Cod increasing over the past ten years. Previously, whether living on the East Coast, West Coast, in Europe or in the Middle East, she consistently made her way to the Cape each summer. Epstein grew up in Massachusetts and is based here while traveling and writing for national and international publications.

BY BECKY SUE EPSTEIN

Many of us have harbored the secret dream of moving to Cape Cod and starting a small business so we could live here full time. Some of us actually try it. But we never know how it will succeed. That's what Dana and Arthur Tillman are finding out right now.

A year and half ago, they took over a small restaurant outside of the town of Falmouth on the Peachtree Farm. They had tried to move to Massachusetts some years ago, from Michigan. But they didn't succeed then.

Dana and Arthur both graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1985. Then they moved back to Dana's hometown of Detroit, Michigan. Arthur found work at a country club and Dana became a sous chef in a restaurant, and also did some food styling for photography.

"I love the camera," she says. "And a good friend of mine was a photographer."

She worked for the Detroit Free Press newspaper, and for advertising agencies.

After a few years, the couple decided they would pursue their dream

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of moving to Massachusetts and working for a small restaurant.

"We used to summer here every summer – in West Falmouth," relates Dana, because Arthur's mother and sister lived there. "We told them, 'We'll be back here.'"

Dana and Arthur both found jobs at a restaurant near Boston, where they planned to settle down. But when Dana's family heard about the plan, Dana says they "made us an offer... 'You want to start a family, come work in the family business.'"

It was 100-year-old seafood business; Dana's was the fourth generation. She worked there with her husband, father and brother-in-law – and she and Arthur started their family. But after several years, the business was sold. So Dana and Arthur finished up their contracts and moved to Cape Cod four years ago. Finally.

Dana continues: "We both got totally different jobs. Arthur was with North Coast Seafoods for two and a half years. I got a job in Woods Hole [at the Marine Biological Laboratory's Swope Center cafeteria]." She baked pastries and made the cold foods – and also did some food styling for the company that ran the food service there. She had a great crew, and "it was a great time," she remembers.

In the meantime, Arthur and Dana's little girls had grown into young sportswomen, playing on the local ice hockey team.

We "were sitting at the ice hockey rink [and] someone said, 'Go check this place out.'"

The place turned out to be the recently closed Peachtree Farms restaurant, a small building on a seven-acre parcel

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Dana's

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of land with a working farm.

"The whole seven acres and building were in disrepair," she explained. Dana and Arthur made a proposal to the South Pond Area Bird Sanctuary (owners of the property) and soon it was accepted. Because the restaurant had been abandoned, it was in terrible shape.

"I had to have a company called Disaster clean for a week," Dana recalls.

The Tillmans gutted the place. They brought in restaurant equipment and opened Dana's Kitchen in July 2005.

When I visited shortly after the little restaurant opened, they were doing a good lunch business; it was relaxing to sit outside on the deck and eat. I had no idea how the restaurant would do, so I checked back periodically. Most new restaurants fail fairly quickly, so I was pleased to see they were still going strong last fall, over a year later. What happened? I asked.

Arthur and Dana developed their eat-in lunch business fairly quickly. Then they discovered the off-premise

lunch business. Not just take-out, but business lunches.

"We do a lot of doctors' luncheons," Dana explains. "We fax out our menu to about 25, 30 offices, even in Sandwich and Bourne."

The menu changes seasonally, but Dana's Kitchen has two soups every day, six salads, a selection of deli-type "stacked" sandwiches and roll-ups. (The buttermilk biscuit-topped chicken stew is wonderful.) During football season they tend to make jambalaya and white meat chili. On Fridays you might get haddock chowder and Portuguese kale soup – made with local produce when possible, and with their great seafood connections.

"North Coast [Seafood] has a high end product," Dana reminds me.

What has made this venture successful so far? I would say it's Dana and Arthur's experience, as well as their adaptability. They have seen opportunities and taken advantage of them. They have expanded into catering, which has steadily increased their year-round business. And they are now open early in the morning, serving home-made pastries and other

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continental breakfast items. They have also installed a flat-screen TV and wireless Internet access for their regulars.

Dana says quality and consistency are the most important elements in this business. The Tillmans have developed a core of regulars, local year-rounders. People come in as much as three times a day, for coffee in the morning, then lunch, and perhaps to get a cookie for a mid-afternoon break. There's a strong sense of community here.

"It's become such a family," Dana marvels.

It's a very homey business, too. When Arthur and Dana cook for small family reunions, for dinner parties and cocktail parties, clients often bring in their own platters to put the food on.

But Dana's Kitchen is still a work in progress, it seems.

"Open up your own business and you've got to work the kinks out," Dana cautions. "For the first year, you have to figure out what people

want. You start out with so much and dwindle down if it doesn't sell... What they needed here was a nice bakery and a great deli. That's what I'm trying to provide."

"We have so much background in the food business it was a really good fit," she says. But "we're a little family business. It's very hard. It's very time consuming... I wouldn't recommend it to people [unless they have a background in the field]."

Then she cheers up, enthusing, "We have a lot of fun with it... I love our location. It's fun in the summertime, cozy in the winter. It's beautiful [here] all the time."

That's the beginning of the story. When you decide to check out the next chapter in the Dana's Kitchen story, call first: They are

open year round but hours vary according to the demands of their clientele in the winter. And then there's that matter of possibly closing for a week to replace some of the old windows before summer ...

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Trythis!

Pasta Putanesca

Recipe from Arthur Tillman of Dana's Kitchen in Falmouth.

(Serves 4)

This is a quick pasta with lively flavors. In the past, I've had the sauce over penne pasta; Arthur Tillman prefers it with fettuccine. Use the best quality, most flavorful ingredients you can get.

"This is a good winter recipe, and it's simple," Arthur states. "It originated in Italy, in the slums of Naples, I believe. The name translates into 'pasta in the style of the prostitute' - it's got an aroma that pulls you in!" Arthur makes it at home and for catering menus.

- 2 Tbs. high-quality olive oil
- 3 anchovy fillets, finely chopped - or more, to taste
- 3 cloves of garlic, finely minced or put through a garlic press
- 1 ½ tsp. crushed red pepper flakes - or more, to taste
- 1 28-oz. can best quality Italian plum tomatoes - San Marzano if possible
- ¼ cup fresh chopped parsley
- ¼ cup calamata olives, pitted and chopped (or other strong olive) - or more, to taste
- 1 Tbs. plus 1 1/2 tsp. capers, chopped - or more, to taste
- Fettuccini, good quality, dried - enough for four servings
- Parmesan cheese, several ounces, and a grater for the table

Heat olive oil on medium heat in sauté pan. Add anchovies, garlic, pepper flakes. Stir frequently until anchovies start to lightly brown. Add tomatoes, parsley, olives, capers. Heat through.

Cook fettuccini al dente (slightly firm). In the meantime, warm a large bowl in an oven or under hot water. Drain fettuccini and put in bowl. Pour sauce over the pasta and toss. Serve at once. Offer parmesan cheese, grated at the table.

Whole grain baguettes are a good accompaniment, and a light green salad will complete the meal, with a light but full-bodied red wine. Chianti Classico is Arthur's favorite.