

## SLIDERS AND SAFE HARBOR:

W h a t  
C o m b o!

By Peggy McGuinness

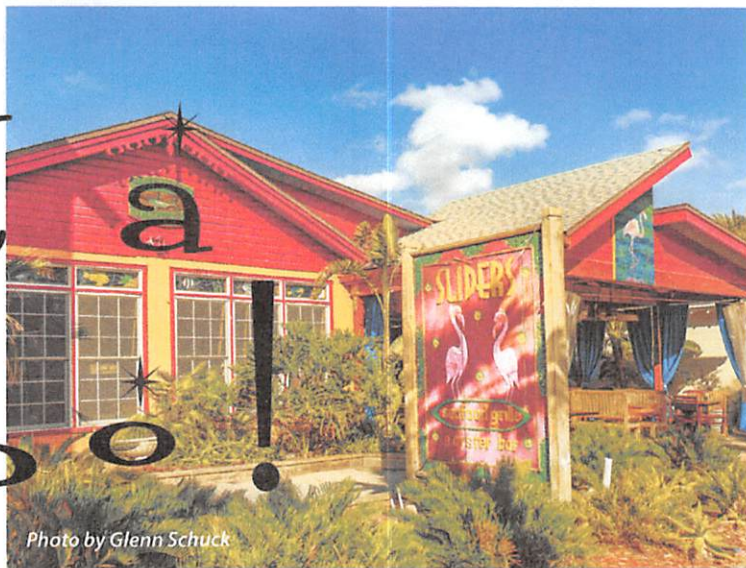


Photo by Glenn Schuck

Sliders Oyster Bar and Grille, a staple in Neptune Beach since 1982 at 218 1st St., has recently been sold by Valerie and Dave Pickett. The new owners are Chris and Deanna Wooten, owners of Safe Harbor Seafood Market and Restaurant. Long married and the parents of five children, the Wooten's have strong ties to both the beach and the seafood industry.

Chris, one of nine children, grew up on Oak St. just a few blocks south of Sliders. He recalls when Sam Miller owned the restaurant, and it stood where the Bookmark is now, with seating for only about twenty patrons. He also remembers when Willoughby's Auto Center occupied the space where Sliders is today, and his parents took their car there for service.

Chris began his career in the seafood business in 1991 when he went to work at Safe Harbor in Mayport, owned by Gerald Pack, who comes from a long line of shrimpers and is Deanna's father. Gerald is "the hardest working self-made man in the history of seafood" according to Chris, who went to work for his future father-in-law after he and Deanna got engaged. He proudly tells me that Gerald is a "legend in the business" who continues to run Safe Harbor Seafood's wholesale operations today.

Safe Harbor primarily sold their fare to supermarkets in the early days but also sold to some restaurants. As a local boy and lifeguard captain in Neptune Beach, Chris was very familiar with the Jacksonville area beach towns and started out doing "beach runs" for Safe Harbor, delivering Mayport shrimp and fish to restaurants up and down the coast. The industrious young man approached Gerald after some time and proposed that his boss stop paying him for his time and start paying him 25 cents per pound on his deliveries. This new arrangement worked out for both, and Chris has been in the business ever since.

Chris and Deanna had their first date at Sliders and it has long held a special place in their hearts. The Wootens had thought about acquiring Sliders a few times over the years, but it wasn't until John Goelz, Sliders landlord and the Picketts good friend, helped to bring the Picketts and Wootens together that they finally struck a deal.

Chris says the Picketts were "trailblazers of north Florida cuisine" and that he plans to take what worked best at Sliders and build on it. This approach will likely include bringing back some of the original Sliders menu items, such as "tugboat stew" which was a local favorite in the past. He has also changed the "center of the plate" overnight by offering a quality of seafood that only Safe Harbor can provide. The Wootens plan to have seasonal offerings that "show up on the Sliders specials menu before any other local restaurant." Fresh stone crabs have already appeared as a special and were an instant hit. Sliders will also have a new wine list and now offers "signature cocktails" from St. Augustine Distillery.

Safe Harbor, which has a 75,000-square foot warehouse and 800 yards of waterfront, sends a fresh supply of seafood to the Sliders kitchen daily. Chris has also installed a fish case from which a limited amount of Safe Harbor fresh seafood and Mayport shrimp are sold.

Chris and Deanna are bringing exciting changes to Sliders in the next few months. The menu is currently being updated, and new flat screen TVs have been installed on the outdoor patio, in the dining room and the bar. Additional upgrades to be made over time will include installation of new kitchen equipment and updated dining room furniture.

Chris and Deanna still live in Neptune Beach, as do their children. Brooke, 22, recently graduated from the University of Florida and works for her parents and Alec, 19, is also part of the family business. Luke, 15, attends Bishop Kenny High School, and younger siblings Jake, 14, and Channing, 7, are at St. Paul's.

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