



# WAY TO GO, WARGO'S!

BELOVED HARFORD COUNTY TAVERN  
ENTERS ITS 44th YEAR IN BUSINESS

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

*"Ours is the oldest liquor license owned by the same people in Harford County!"*

**S**o proclaims Andy Wargo, who has co-owned and operated Wargo's Restaurant and Tavern in Forest Hill, Maryland, since September 29, 1980 with his wife, Brenda. As such, Wargo's is the ideal establishment to launch this new series of articles on eating and drinking places in and around the state that bear the name of either the owner or the founding family.

September 29, 1980. Back then, the Colts still played in Baltimore, Jimmy Carter was President, and Cal Ripken Jr. was hitting home runs for Charlotte in the minor league. While many things have stayed the same at Wargo's over the years, some things have certainly changed. Brenda recalls, "Initially, it was called Andy Wargo's Restaurant and Tavern on the big marquee in the parking lot. When we decided to renovate the marquee, it turned into Wargo's Forest Hill Inn, which I loved! But people were calling and asking if we had availability in our hotel! So, much to my chagrin, we changed it to what it is currently and that's Wargo's Restaurant and Tavern. People commonly refer to us as 'Wargo's.' When we answer the phone,

**Brenda and Andy Wargo**  
Owners & Operators  
Wargo's Restaurant and Tavern



we simply say, 'Wargo's, how can I help you?'

What has changed in nearly 44 years of being in business are the people themselves. "We are into our third generation with customers," Brenda noted. "The first generation would come in with their children. And now their children have children. They see me getting older. They see me aging. And do you know what I hear again and again? 'Don't ever retire!'" And to that, Brenda replies, "You do know how old I am, right?" To them, I am ageless. To me? I'm 72. But they do keep me sharp."

And, of course, Andy and Brenda have had generations of their own. One daughter, Kimberly Wargo, is a manager. And their son-in-law, Marco Santilli, is a chef-manager who makes all of the menu's soups from scratch along with long-time cook, David. Brenda, meanwhile, draws raves for her crabcake recipe. And Wargo's bakes its own rolls, which makes the pit beef all the more tasty and tempting to order.

As for Wargo's bar scene? It's hopping and the menu has also evolved over the decades. Andy has only created one drink himself, and it was years ago. He called it "The Pennzoil Shooter" and served it during NASCAR races when Wargo's used to be open on Sundays. He mixed together a shot of vodka and a shot of root beer

Schnapps, "shaken and poured into a glass."

He stated, "I was 30 when we took over back in 1980, and Brenda was 28. A friend of mine told me early on that 'Brenda does what her job is and you do what your job is. Don't overlap each other!' That was a key piece of advice that I'll never forget."

Brenda added, "That is what we call 'the division of labor.' Andy is in charge of the bar. He rules the bar, and I rule and am in charge of the dining room. Fortunately or unfortunately, however you look



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**Kimberly Wargo**  
*Manager*  
**Wargo's Restaurant and Tavern**

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at it and what day you're talking about, we share the rule of the kitchen. Forty-three-plus years ago when we took over, it was just martinis and Manhattans and whiskey sours. We had draft beers here and there, and we had National Bo, of course. Today? I can't even pronounce some of the names of the drinks, and they change every week! I don't try to keep up with them anymore. Luckily, my bartenders do. And they'll just tell us, 'Hey, we need to bring this into the stockroom' 'Or we need more of this.' Just the vodka flavors alone are overwhelming."

Through it all, though, the Wargos try and impart an overall beverage service philosophy to their staff. "Don't over pour," Brenda said. "And card people, card people, card people! In all the years we've been in business, we have only been cited once. You also have to know when to cut customers off, and know how to cut them off. Don't give away drinks. Don't drink on the job. Of course, that's a given. We do give shift drinks. When the employee gets off their

shift, they are allowed to have one drink on us ... on me and Andy."

So, after all this time, does running a bar and restaurant operation come easy to this couple? Most of the time, it does. But everyone knows that hospitality is one of the toughest businesses around, no matter how long you've been at it.

"Staffing is our biggest challenge," Brenda declared. "There is always somebody on vacation. Or, this time of year, somebody is always out sick. Trying to have enough employees to keep us up and running day after day . . . that is the hardest. Last weekend [this interview was conducted near the end of January], we had two cooks, a bartender, and a dishwasher out. This is our busy season. We're fast approaching our peak time. So, that was really hard! My

husband has to fill in whenever we have that many people out. He does a bang-up job."

But that all comes with the territory of owning a business that has one's name on it. When your identity is up there on a marquee, you can't help but feel a heightened responsibility for customer service and food and drink quality. Andy concluded, "In the past if something wasn't quite right, I have said in a constructive manner to an employee or to the staff, 'Hey, gang. That's my name on the building! Make sure we get it right.' I try and say it in a positive, learning way so that I am not criticizing. But, hey. And the end of the day, it's Wargo's! I don't want people beating up on the name because somebody didn't get something right."

Looking ahead, both Wargos are feeling positive about both the business's and their family's future prospects. "I have THE greatest partner in the world," Andy remarked. "We've been together for 56 years. She was my prom date. We have beautiful children and grandchildren, and she is the lady who made it all happen."

Added Brenda, "Oh, there's no stopping us now. We have our loyal clientele, and they are always bringing friends. It all keeps mushrooming. As long as we keep doing what we've been doing all of these years, I don't think we can go wrong." ■

