

Coffee Shop Grows Forward by Turning Back Time

Mobjack Bay Coffee Roasters Expands Kitchen Using Historic Building's Original Footprint

By Melissa James, York County Contributor

When your business is located in a 300-year-old house, your efforts are frequently constrained by preservation rules. So it was a lucky day for Mobjack Bay Coffee Roasters and Petite Café when they discovered this time, history was on their side.



Owners Celeste and Jo Gucanac are actually history devotees, who relish being part of Historic Yorktown's Main Street. They deferentially accept each "no" or "only if..." when seeking permission to make alterations at the circa-1720 Cole Digges House. They were prepared for the unique challenges of operating inside National Park Service historic building. And of course, tenants who were eager to both maintain and improve the property was a boon to York County.

When the Gucanacs decided to seek approval for expanding their kitchen, they were expecting the usual issues. But it was worth the risk, given how much the current facility was limiting their business.

"One of the beauties of being in a building like this is that it's unique and it's a destination, and people really enjoy coming," said Celeste. "But one of the challenges is that it has a kitchen that was previously somebody's home kitchen. To repurpose it as a commercial kitchen required creativity. But we really needed it to be bigger to accommodate commercial kitchen equipment."

To make such a change, the Gucanacs knew they would have to persuade the NPS that their plans would not ruin or alter any historically significant element of the structure. So they began their own research... and to their surprise and delight, discovered that the original footprint of the kitchen was actually larger!



“When we moved in, the area was open lattice and a patio, but used to be closed in. That find allowed us to bump out the kitchen to encompass the entire original footprint,” said Celeste.

Their mission was to build a structure within the original footprint with three objectives:

1. Respect the historic nature of the building,
2. Respect the needs of Mobjack as it grows
3. Leave the building better than it was when they moved in, so if they ever leave, the next business coming in has the ability to thrive there

After a year of paperwork to get their initial plans approved by the NPS, the Gucanacs presented their kitchen expansion proposal to the County’s Economic Development Authority.

“The EDA’s support was a game changer for us,” she said. “With these types of projects, it’s hard to estimate the actual total cost, since it’s in a historic structure. We knew we needed new equipment, too. The EDA incentive grant made it happen for Mobjack. This was definitely not a project we could have done on our own, had they not been hand-in hand with us. We invested way more money on top of the grant, but it was instrumental.”

While “kitchen expansion” sounds like a small project, this was an extensive undertaking. The Gucanacs improved the building’s exterior by replacing the old lattice and rotten wood, plus maintenance on the dormers and other outside elements of the house. Now that the space is complete. Mobjack Bay Coffee Roasters and Petit Café has been able to add a larger espresso machine, larger oven, and more sandwich boards. They also can fit more staff in the kitchen, with a roomier work environment. For customers, this means receiving their orders faster so they can get back out to enjoy Yorktown.



Back porch prior to renovation



Kitchen expansion, midway through completion

Of course, this new improvement is only the latest of many since the Gucanacs moved in four years ago. They accepted the building as-is and “wanted to give it love,” so they redid the electrical, plumbing, power grid, and many other efforts to bring it up to code and make it a better destination for the community. Their reach, though, goes beyond York County. Mobjack Bay has an ecommerce division that ships all over the U.S., and bring in coffees from around the world.

They only roast exceptional quality, socially responsible coffees, both source certified organic and conventional, Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance certified. Celeste and Jo, along with their three children, focus on living in a way that gives back to life around them. They lead by example with their support of Chesapeake Bay initiatives, and by giving a portion of profits to efforts that directly impact Bay restoration.

“When we talk about a kitchen addition, it’s just one small piece of the entire experience,” said Celeste. “I always encourage people to learn more about who we are and what we have to offer, because we are really a must-see location. Many people don’t know that we have a historian—an American history educator—on site, and we are the only business certified within the National Park system to do tours here. You can experience Yorktown at its finest in a historic building right here through us, and it’s not just through a cup of coffee... it’s through many different things that we offer.”

In October, Mobjack Bay hosted Bon Appetite magazine from New York, and they chose the shop's Deadrise blend as a featured product. They also filmed and interviewed on site. But the Gucanacs get most excited about the way their passions all collide at the store: history, community and coffee.

"I mean, coffee was the drink of the patriots! We were dumping tea in the York River because we didn't want to pay taxes on it," said Celeste. "So, we're giving customers a historic experience with the drink of patriots, just a block and a half from the battlefields...I'm not sure how it can get any better than that."



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