A Small Town with a Big Appetite

About 4:00pm on a typical sunny, Southern California Tuesday at Salt Creek Beach, the wind picks up and the waves die down. After a few more minutes of staring at the mushy masses of waves emerging from the flat horizon, Max Fisher runs his hand through his sun-bleached blond hair and points his bright blue eyes towards the sand. Having spotted a promising wave coming his way, he paddles hard and catches a wave in on his 6’2 short board. Making the steep drop on the difficult, Salt Creek wave — not meant for amateurs — Fisher quickly carves back around towards the pocket of the wave. He bottom turns at the wave’s base, then shifts his body left, momentarily vertical, pointing the tip of his board skyward and shooting spray over the back, a maneuver surfers call a shwack*.*

Grabbing his board from the white wash, he exits the water and walks up the hill towards his black Toyota Tundra. He wipes the sand and salt off of his skin and towel changes into a black shirt with the words “The Shwack Beach Grill” printed on the back. Loading his board into the bed of his truck, he drives out of the parking lot and continues on his commute to work. Four minutes later, he turns right off of Pacific Coast Highway and into the parking lot of his restaurant.

“I love being able to say good bye to my friends at the beach only to see them a few hours later as they come in for dinner at The Shwack,” says Fisher.

The Shwack Beach Grill, located in Dana Point, California now welcomes hundreds of surfers and locals alike through its doors and into its tiny room. Body builders from Rado’s Gym next door, couples waiting on their laundry from the Dana Point Dry Cleaners on its other side and beachgoers making the ten minute walk from the Salt Creek sand all congregate for breakfast, lunch and dinner. At night, “The Shwack,” written in large, loopy letters illuminates the corner of Del Prado and Amber Lantern, creating a prominent entrance into the heart of downtown Dana Point. With no more than 20 tables inside and out, lines of people waiting for a seat zigzag out the door and along the street back towards the beach. Inside, the small building bustles with commotion. Tank-topped and sandal-clad twenty somethings track sand all throughout the restaurant. Shwack-shirted servers follow with brooms and dustbins. Other employees call out people’s names, bringing customers their long-awaited burgers. A large chalkboard hangs above the cash register with handwritten menu items, all named in surfer slang. There’s the Frontside French Toast, the Low Tide Turkey Burger, the Shaka Tacos. For the kids, or “groms,” the Shwack offers the Grom Burger, the Lil’ Man Chicken Sand or the Chickadees Chicken Tenders.

Hints of bacon linger in the air all throughout the day. One of the most-ordered burgers, the Big Al’s Bacon Burger, comes out with two freshly sizzling pieces of bacon and a slice of american cheese pooled over and bubbling. A fried egg if you’re really hungry. Big plates of salads pass by as servers look for the customers who ordered from the sizeable list of gourmet salads. Red onions, tomatoes, avocado, red pepper, chicken breast and house-made ginger vinaigrette all pile on top of a generous portion of spinach. Five huge, flat screen TVs hang from the restaurant’s corners, play old surf movies of wipeouts and wins set on repeat. Multiple times a day, Fisher’s manager, Devin Sinner, has to wait for groups of longhaired surfers to realize they are next in line. Distracted as they watch surfers take off on waves and verbally note exactly which surf spot it is by the wave’s speed and size, the customers many times need some prompting to bring them back to their order.

Fisher, now out of the car and inside the beach grill, stands in front of the cash register, drinking a late afternoon beer on tap and taking his customers’ dinner orders. Despite the massive line of customers, he knows that they know that the house-made, healthy beach food is worth the wait. For five years in a row, The Shwack has won Orange County Register’s Best Burger in Dana Point as well as the Dana Point People’s Choice Award for Best Burger. Fisher attributes it all to the food.

“Before we opened, there was no place to go in this beach town for middle of the road, surfer food,” he says. “There was either fast food or fancy food. People just want a good burger and some good beer.”

Eight refurbished wooden tables and hand painted teal green chairs surround the restaurant. All of them taken. Beer is always flowing and the staff is always moving. If one of the employees stops, Sinner will not be happy. And they know by now that they do not want to make Sinner unhappy. While the manager, just out of Saddleback Junior College, knows how to boss her employees around, she also knows how to keep the restaurant running smoothly. Her restaurant is clean and her staff is smiling. And so is Fisher. As long as everyone is happy, she can run the joint like it’s hers. A smiling staff leads to smiling customers, which leads to a smiling boss.

Fisher didn’t always want to run his own restaurant. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with the restaurant business. After spending his childhood trying his hardest to wait up for his father who never returned home from his own restaurant until late into the night, Fisher vowed to stay away from the business and to stay close to his family. His dad had worked as the Joint Venture Partner for Outback Steakhouse and eventually left to open his own successful Italian Restaurant, Cosmo’s, in Aliso Viejo. Once his dad opened his own doors at Cosmo’s, he returned home earlier and had time on the weekends to teach Fisher how to surf. They would trek down the San Clemente trails and into the world-class waves of Trestles, Churches and Barbed Wires. After the morning surf session, they would need lunch. They wanted a place for post-beach, surfer food but could never find just the right thing.

“Surfing became our thing,” says Fisher. “We surfed in the mornings and then searched for a good place to eat for breakfast afterwards.”

Back in school, Fisher struggled to graduate from Dana Hills High School in 1999. He just wanted to surf and snow board. His mom pushed him to finish high school and move on towards college, but he had other plans. She continually asked him what he wanted to do, where he saw himself in five years and what he had planned for college. He guessed he wanted to open his own bar. That way, there would never be a shortage of good beer. But then again, the hours didn’t sound appealing. So Fisher moved out of his parents place down south and up to Lake Tahoe to snowboard. Or to go to junior college. But really, to snowboard. Two years on his own taught him little about where he really wanted to go post-graduation. But he graduated with a business degree, found work in construction and discovered an interest in attending Carlsbad’s Golden State Contracting School. Being down near the water, he was able to surf again. Graduating in two years with a contracting license from Carlsbad, Fisher moved back up to San Clemente and worked several years in and out of contracting jobs. He drove all over the county. Up to Newport Beach to help construct cabinets, down to Salt Creek to surf, all the way to Vista for electrical installations, over to Trestles to surf. But by 2011, he could no longer afford to live this kind of month-to-month lifestyle. Now married and trying to support his wife, Erin Fisher, he needed a more stable job.

On his way home from the beach one day, he drove past a recently-closed Starbucks on the corner of PCH and Amber Lantern. He always felt sorry for whoever opened any business at that location. While right off of PCH and in the heart of downtown Dana Point, the building was poised in a promising location. So many people drove past that corner, but no one ever parked. Before it was a Starbucks, it changed hands from a hair salon, to a dress shop, to a smoothie place. None of them stuck it out for longer than two years. But Fisher had a thought. Maybe he was just hungry from surfing, but he got out his phone and called his dad. *What if we opened that beach grill with surfer food that we have been dreaming about since I was in high school?*

And that’s just what he did. With his dad’s assistance, Fisher acquired the property and turned it around into a beach grill within six months. No matter what time of the day, his friends and neighbors would drive by and wave at him working on the restaurant. Fisher utilized his expertise as a construction handyman and built up the restaurant from the inside out. He refurbished the walls, textured the floors, sanded and stained the counters. He reinvented the place, giving it an entirely new look. By May of 2011, two weeks after Fisher opened his doors, surfers flooded in looking for the after-surf sustenance he promised.

The Shwack grew into a community hub for locals. Right in the center of town, the restaurant opens early for the retired surfers to gather around a couple of the tables and share surf stories with their coffees in hand. The Dana Hills lacrosse and baseball teams meet at The Shwack after their games. The coaches meet for a burger every Thursday. Fisher constructed a place for the small town to gather and grow closer over a beer and a burger.

Restaurants around town now had a new standard to live up to. Owners from nearby eateries walked into The Shwack and found that everything from the sea green floor to the hand painted surfboards hanging from the ceiling culminated into one, cohesive look. Fisher’s vision for a laidback, yet tasteful restaurant had formed into something better than he had imagined. Fisher claims that Jack’s Italian Restaurant, Coastal Kitchen, Two Left Forks and Craft House, all within walking distance of the Shwack, reconstructed their own restaurants to give off a similar feel to capture the Shwack look. Not only did they revamp the aesthetics, they went to work on their menus, seeking a greater appeal from surfers.

Surfer food has to be pretty substantial. They need a forkful of something quantitative very soon after getting out of the water. Riding waves all the way to the sand, having to paddle all the way back out and duck dive under the oncoming waves can really work up an appetite. That’s where The Shwack comes in. Those who “dawn patrol it,” or paddle out just as the sun rises and get out of the water in time for work, can stop by and pick up a Breki Wrap or a Dawn Patrol Sandwich. As long as there is a big portion in front of them with lots of protein, some carbs, a cup of coffee and a little bacon, surfers are happy. It’s a much healthier option than the usual, after-surf donut shop run. Customers who come in for lunch and want to veer away from the burgers and chicken sandwiches can order the Shaka Tacos. Three tacos — basa fish, shredded carnitas or chicken stuffed inside each — three sweet, tangy and spicy sauces drizzled on top. It’s the palate-satisfying trifecta.

With a mix between fast and sit-down food, the restaurant offers its fair share of healthy food as well. Salads, such as the ahi tuna or garden salad burst with color and fresh flavor. Servers deliver the chicken breast sandwiches on whole wheat buns, topped with grilled onions, tomatoes, lettuce and secret Shwack sauce. The dinner options include grilled basa fish with steamed broccoli, steak and potatoes with grilled onions and peppers, or a half rack of gooey ribs. Everything is cooked in 0% trans-fat canola oil and made to order right behind the cashier. Customers can peek over and watch the cooks form the patties or slice the chicken breast, place them on the grill and assemble each meal onto bright green plates.

But Shwack is best known for the classic Shwack burger. There isn’t anything classic about it, however. While Fisher kept the burger, bun, lettuce and tomato, he has introduced several little touches that make all the difference. Regular, Mike Peralta, knows everything about his favorite order.

“I order it exactly the way it comes every time. Why change what’s already perfect? The Shwack burger is presented on a brioche bun with a medium rare patty. I can see the cooks put my patty on the grill and can taste the freshness. On top, comes the classic lettuce and tomato, and then a heaping portion of pickled onions that are to die for. The onions give off a sweet and spicy crunch. Last but not least, there is the Shwack sauce. I don’t know what it is, but it’s better than In-N-Out’s. It’s this creamy, orangey, tangy sauce that brings the whole burger to life. It’s unreal.”

Regulars, such as Peralta, quickly find their restaurant niche in such a small town as Dana Point. And Shwack reels in its fair share of regulars. There’s Arto, who walks from home almost everyday about 6:00pm to pick up his turkey burger, extra pickled onions, add avocado, add pepper jack cheese. Or Rado, Fisher’s personal trainer, who works right next door and walks in every day for lunch. He barely fits both of his muscular arms through the double doors and maneuvers his way past the circuitousness lines of customers. Once inside, he skips past the cash registers and addresses the cooks directly in his thick, German accent.

“I vood like zee summah spinach sahlad. Estrah spinach. Chicken breast and whole avocado and brrroccoli. Sahlad dressink on zee side. Zank you.”

Mike and Jayme Peralta come about lunchtime for a Shwack burger for him and an ahi tuna salad for her. Spuds if it’s Friday. Peralta remembers watching Fisher grow up down at Salt Creek. He recalls seeing him donned in a blue Dana Hills jersey, jockeying for waves and winning heats during the winter season of the school’s surf team. He charged it out on the water and always went for the quick cutbacks and daring drops. He loved to shwack.

The Peralta’s son, Chris works with Jayme at their local sign shop and joins them for lunch on many days. He remembers taking a couple classes with Fisher at Dana.

“I would have talked to him more, but he slept through most of his classes,” laughs Chris. “But I see him out in the water all the time and I’m stoked he has done so well for himself. And I live off of those fish tacos.”

After the five years of booming business in Dana Point, Fisher has opened the doors of his second beach grill 10 minutes down PCH, in San Clemente. Fisher noted that the people of San Clemente rarely come up to Dana Point and the people of Dana Point usually stay in Dana Point. He wanted to open up a bigger restaurant with a sit-down atmosphere, far enough away from his Dana Point clientele, but close enough for them to come down and try out the new menu if they choose.

The Shwack Cantina in San Clemente opened at the end of the summer in 2016 with lines out the door, down the street and almost to the San Clemente train tracks. In the same way he stumbled across the Dana Point location, Fisher was driving home from work on a Sunday evening and passed Bull Taco, a well-known, local taco joint. But on this Monday afternoon, as he drove towards work, Bull Taco was gone. The place was empty. He peered into the windows and saw the perfect setting for a second Shwack. Except bigger. And this time with a full bar. He would finally own his own bar and not have to work the long hours. That’s what his staff would be there for. He knew the parameters of the former Bull Taco well, for he had frequented the taco stop many nights back in high school. The outside patio would be the perfect size for his hand painted, metal tables and rustic, multi-colored patio chairs. The inside of the soon-to-be-restaurant had room for a bar on one end of the restaurant and booths on the other. Even room for a salsa bar, which he envisioned would be perfect for a slightly more Mexican-themed cantina. That’s what it would be. *The Shwack Cantina*. He got back in his truck and dialed his dad.

Between the two restaurants, Fisher now has a lot on his hands. The week before last, he walked in for his morning meeting with Devin just in time to witness his head chef, Benito, cut his finger pretty deep. Grabbing his Kona coffee and pushing his meeting with Devin back a couple hours, he drove Benito to the ER and waited with him to make sure his finger would heal quickly and he would be able return to work as soon as possible. No one could cook up a good Breki Wrap like Benito. Fluffy eggs, some potatoes and a little bacon, all tightly wrapped in a warm whole wheat tortilla. Fisher had to make sure his head chef could return quickly. He kept up with the consistency and quality that Fisher hoped for with no more than his culinary expertise and a spatula.

Benito has been with Fisher since the beginning. As head chef, he has helped hone in on the beach grill niche that Shwack has mastered. Without Benito, there wouldn’t be any Shwack spuds. The whole idea of the flash fried potato wedges served with jalapeño bacon ranch came from Benito. The crispy on the outside, warm and soft on the inside, spuds pair perfectly with the creamy ranch dip filled with substantial chunks of bacon and jalapeños leftover from the morning’s breakfast. These differently sized potato chunks barely last a second on a Shwack table.

Opening a family friendly restaurant can be hard. Fisher has to dedicate most of his time to hopping between two restaurants, making sure employees are up to par and customers are completely satisfied. He spent all of last week preparing for the weekend’s Dana Point Whale Festival. Every March, the community of Dana Point gathers together to celebrate the annual migration of the California Gray Whale. The day starts with lots of family friendly activities that kick off with a community parade. The event spans well throughout the day and hungry locals must walk right past the Shwack’s wide open doors.

Fisher staffed up his restaurant, preparing for the hungry onslaught. His buddies and he had spent months renovating a couple of old golf carts and today, in the parade, they propelled through the masses, honking the golf carts’ high-pitched horns and passing out free burger cards to prospective customers. People swerved out of the way of Fisher’s blue and white custom golf cart whose front end resembled a Roles Royce and returned a shaka as he peeled out of the way and back towards the parade.

“It was sweet,” says Fisher, clad in a bright yellow collared shirt that matched his buddies’. “Nothing like a crazy guy in a golf cart to get more people to eat Shwack burgers.”

Amidst all the craziness, he does his best to be home in time to tuck his kids in, knowing he may have to get back to the restaurant later in order to help close. While he says keeping the wife happy is enough responsibility, he now has to take care of two little groms of his own. Banyan, named after his favorite surf spot on the Big Island of Hawaii, just turned four a couple of weeks ago. His daughter, Harlow, turned two around the same time. His kids have a lot of energy — especially early in the morning. By 5:00am, Banyan and Harlow wake Fisher and his wife up with some early morning rough housing. Coming off of a couple late night shifts at the restaurant and having not yet consumed any coffee, Fisher sometimes struggles. But he makes it a priority to be there for his children in a closer way than his dad was. Family first. Then coffee. Then surf. Then beer.

While he makes it a point to be home now, he knows that summer hours will run longer. As the sun lingers longer and longer in the sky, the lines will only grow longer and longer outside the restaurants. He won’t get home until the kids are well into their second REM cycle. But that’s what he enjoys about right now. He can cherish the 11-minute commute to the Dana Point grill and 8-minute commute to the San Clemente cantina. While it is still March, he will drive home as soon as the crowds die down and be there to read Banyan and Harlow their bedtime story. He will worry about the summer months when they get here.

He loves his life now and wants nothing more than to cherish his children’s young years. But he does see a growing future. He still hopes to open a third and a fourth Shwack in the coming years.

“I’m not looking, but I’m looking,” he says, slipping off his Shwack shirt and pulling on his wetsuit. “I don’t want to open one just yet, because I love my current lifestyle. But if the right opportunity comes along, I can’t say no.”

In between the lunch and dinner rush, he steps onto the Salt Creek sand. After kneeling down to wax his board and stretch, he then paddles out to catch a few waves, greeting his friends, neighbors and customers out in the water.