

## Keep on Truckin'

Brett and Amanda Stutes continue rolling out the culinary creativity — whether on wheels or at their brick and mortar storefront

BY WILL KALEC  
PORTRAIT BY ROMERO & ROMERO

➔ LITTLE DO LAKE CHARLES LUNCHERS know the reason there's sauce on the side of your face and napkins pinned under your thighs to keep them from blowing away in the wind is because a loving mother underestimated the spoken capabilities of her toddler.

Rewind back to the winter of 2015. Brett and Amanda Stutes are riding around town with their middle child, Fletcher, in the back seat. Amanda can't remember where they were going, and honestly, it's not important. The point is, for years, Brett, a born entrepreneur who had pretty much gotten into a routine doing construction, always talked about opening a taco-only restaurant — the concept being his “baby” as Amanda tells it.

So, perhaps looking for a sign, (or more likely, a surefire way to get what he wanted) Brett rolled the dice and shifted all of his tortilla-wrapped dreams upon the unsuspecting tongue of his 18-month-old son.

“If Fletcher can say ‘taco,’ we’re opening this restaurant,” Brett bargained with Amanda.

For whatever reason, Amanda went along with the deal.

“Fletcher can you say ‘taco?’” Brett asked, putting the toddler on the spot.

Without hesitation, Fletcher blurted out, “Taco!”

“In hindsight, it was probably bad agreement on my part,” Amanda reflects, “because Fletcher was always very smart and well spoken, even at that age. I was like, ‘You little stinker.’”

Founded on Fletcher's clutch performance, The Sloppy Taco in all its incarnations — at first a festival booth, then an about-town mobile food truck, and ultimately as a cool, funky storefront on Kirkman Street — has evolved into one of Southwest Louisiana's most differently delicious culinary go-to's. Featuring an ever-changing menu, The Sloppy Taco offers a comforting mix of traditional Mexican dishes like chicken tacos



and more adventurous creations such as an Oyster Taco and an Asian-Fusion taco complete with wasabi and soy sauce. Whatever is ordered, the overflowing, heavily-sauced and seasoned filling assures the restaurant lives up to its name.

“Brett and I, we both need creative outlets,” Amanda says. “And for us, this does

that. When we first rolled out, the public was pumped. ‘Heck yeah, finally a food truck in Lake Charles.’ Running a food truck, and being the first mobile food truck in Lake Charles, it was long and interesting journey, because there were no guidelines. There was no plan to follow or road that someone else had already been down. We had to take that



#### TACO YOUR PICK

Popular and unique menu items.

#### GRILLED VEGGIE TACO

This meatless menu option features grilled squash, grilled zucchini and sautéed bell peppers, complemented by black beans, jalapenos, guacamole, a sprinkling of queso fresco and fried green tomatoes. Instead of a flour tortilla, all the ingredients are held together by a giant cabbage leaf — a satisfying, crunchy alternative that vibes nicely with the mostly guilt-free theme.

#### RIBEYE ROLL

The taco's interior is a ground ribeye blend hugged by black beans, jalapenos and bell peppers. A liberal scoop of queso and a handful of shredded cheese cover all that. Because of the taco's heft, the Stutes use a 12-inch tortilla as opposed to the normal 6-incher. Oh, almost forgot the best part...they deep fry the whole thing and serve it with a side of their signature cilantro ranch sauce.

#### CRISPY PORK TACO

The pork is braised then fried lightly, as if it was prepared in a wok. After that, the meat is coated with a sweet Asian-inspired and partnered with shredded cabbage, cucumber, an avocado-wasabi cream sauce and Sriracha.

leap. So it was scary in that regard, but the scariest things can also provide the most satisfaction, too.”

With no path to follow, the Stutes figured out the steps to this complicated Food Truck dance as they went, admittedly stepping on their own toes more than once. Signing permits and paperwork was an everyday occurrence. Cold calling businesses, asking for permission to set up shop on their private property, was surprisingly not easy in the infant years of The Sloppy Taco simply because these owners never had to answer that question before. A few didn't want the truck on the grounds — a humorous anecdote now since events and businesses often solicit the truck to set up shop, essentially flipping the script from just a few years ago. Then, there's the challenge of how much food to bring — “you never want to run out of menu items,” Amanda says — and the eloquent maneuvering required to prepare tacos in such close quarters.

“I remember lying on the lawn of our first festival, afterward — our first festival with the truck,” Amanda says. “And my husband is there, and my brother-in-law is there, and we're all looking at each other thinking, ‘Man, we just got our butts kicked.’ But it was so cool. At that time, that's what we needed to keep pushing forward.”

The loyalty of The Sloppy Taco patrons, and the frequency with which they hunt down the truck or dine in at the restaurant, has afforded the Stutes the flexibility to let their culinary freak flag fly. They're all about the unconventional. Oyster Tacos, sure. Chipotle Shrimp tacos — why not? Regular nachos are great, but so are Mango Crab nachos served on a bed of sturdy fried wonton chips — a brilliant alternative to tortilla chips that turn soggy under the weight of hot, gooey toppings.

“Our mentality is simple — the tortilla is just a vessel to get the goodness in your mouth,” Amanda says. “So there is no limit to what you can create. Some you'll be like ‘Oh, that doesn't work.’ Some you'll say, ‘Oh man, that tastes great.’ That's why we have to put it on [a tortilla] and find out. Live and learn.” ■