##### Harper Talks Episode 14 – Kristina Gaardbo [00:00:02.090] - Brian Shelton

Do you love barbecue? Well, then this show is for you. I'm Brian Shelton. And you're listening to Harper Talks, a co production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harpor Radio today on Harpor Talks. I'm excited to speak with Kristina Gaardbo. Kristina is a graduate of the Harper Nursing program and is now co-owner of the Chicago Culinary Kitchen, which I personally believe has the best barbecue in the region. She recently won the Certified Angus Beef Culinary Innovator of the Year award with her Beef Tallow Cake and Money magazine has named her restaurant the best barbecue in Illinois.

##### [00:00:38.930] - Brian Shelton

Kristina joined me for the Harper Talks podcast over Zoom.

##### [00:00:42.290] - Brian Shelton

Good morning, Kristina. Thanks for being here. How are you?

##### [00:00:44.630] - Kristina Gaardbo

I'm good. How are you?

##### [00:00:46.070] - Brian Shelton

I am peachy. Nice Dreary October Day.

##### [00:00:49.250] - Kristina Gaardbo

Yes, it is. All those other days before were very nice. I heard that was the last one yesterday. Now it's going to be cold and fall.

##### [00:00:55.310] - Brian Shelton

That's right. Real fall. Everybody can get out their boots and scarves. It'll be a good time. It's Han Solo weather, as they say. So, Kristina, anyone who's been to the Chicago Culinary Kitchen knows that you and your husband, Greg, are the Queen and King of barbecue in this area. But you didn't start out in the culinary field. I read that you were a vet tech before you came to Harper College for the nursing program. Is that true?

##### [00:01:22.790] - Kristina Gaardbo

Yes, that's correct. I worked as a vet tech for nine years, and then I was actually working two jobs at the time, and I wanted to make more money and I wanted to help people and expand my knowledge. And so I decided that I really like the medical field. And I went to community College at Harper to get my nursing degree.

##### [00:01:40.010] - Brian Shelton

Which is better working on animals or people.

##### [00:01:43.310] - Kristina Gaardbo

They both have their pros and cons. (laughs) But it's nice. The people, when you're working with them, you can get the appreciation they tell you about it. With animals. It's a little harder to read them sometimes.

##### [00:02:00.490] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So. While you're working as a nurse, I have to ask. So what did your patients think of your tattoos?

##### [00:02:11.530] - Kristina Gaardbo

I'm sorry. Can you repeat that?

##### [00:02:12.610] - Brian Shelton

What did your patients think of your tattoos?

##### [00:02:15.730] - Kristina Gaardbo

I actually did not get started on tattoos till I was 29, being out in the real world and not an entrepreneur at the time. I started with leg sleeves so I could wear pants. Nobody could see my tattoos had one behind my ear and just one on my wrist. But to tell you the truth, I worked with elderly patients and they did love my tattoos. They would ask to see them or if they caught wind that I had gotten a new tattoo, they'd ask to see it.

##### [00:02:42.970] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. I love it. Yeah. I think the world is less snotty about that these days than it used to be so different.

##### [00:02:50.950] - Kristina Gaardbo

I'd be surprised how many professionals have tattoos, right?

##### [00:02:56.170] - Brian Shelton

So you were in the nursing field and you went to Harper College for nursing. What was it like for you for that program? Was it hard? I hear stories.

##### [00:03:05.170] - Kristina Gaardbo

It was extremely hard. It may have been only a two year program back when I went, but yeah, I remember almost every week people were either quitting or they were getting weeded out because they weren't following protocol or weren't getting the grades that they needed to in order to do it. It's a very hard program there and taught a lot of life skills about time management and just everything. It was very difficult.

##### [00:03:31.690] - Brian Shelton

Yes, I hear the stories. I can certainly imagine. So you went through the rigors of the nursing program, but you left that field. Why did you leave nursing?

##### [00:03:41.170] - Kristina Gaardbo

I met my husband while I was finishing up nursing school, and we got married about a year and a half after we met, he had a company that he had started from scratch at the time, like 29 years ago, and he had started in his garage and screen printing and embroidery. And so we had a whole other company, and he had somebody else who was managing the money, AP, HR, marketing, advertising. And he kept trying to get me to jump to what he calls the dark side of entrepreneurship.

##### [00:04:12.850] - Kristina Gaardbo

And that way I could help take care of the company and keep the money and everything in the family rather than having somebody that we didn't know so well actually managing all that, it took a while for him to convince me to do that. The first time that he tried to get me to do it was about a year before I actually did jump ship. I literally had a panic attack. I did not want to work in an office. That was the whole reason I was a vet tech and I'd gone to nursing school is I wanted to be out doing stuff and not stuck behind the computer.

##### [00:04:40.870] - Kristina Gaardbo

But I did eventually decide that it was time to leave nursing. They started downstaffing where I was at. And I was the only nurse in the whole building, which, if you guys know anything about nurses, there's certain things that an RN can do that an LPN cannot do. So it initially becomes the nurses responsibility for whatever is whoever is in that building, no matter if it's my patient or not.

##### [00:05:03.910] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that sounds rough. So you made the transition to entrepreneurship, and you folks were essentially a marketing business, right? Screen printing and embroidery shirts and hats. And that fun kind of stuff.

##### [00:05:12.790] - Kristina Gaardbo

Right. Right.

##### [00:05:13.450] - Kristina Gaardbo

So how did you folks transition to barbecue? I know it's a long story.

##### [00:05:18.310] - Kristina Gaardbo

But after we got married, we started entertaining in our backyard. We had a giant Texas rancher. We were doing indirect smoking and grilling. We'd have friends and family over. It was right during the real big craft beer revolution. So we were really into craft beer. We had a fridge in the garage, totally dedicated to craft beer. We spent a lot of time hopping around to the different breweries, even looked into opening a brewery of our own before getting into the restaurant industry. But because it was the craft beer revolution, it was really hard to find the equipment at a decent cost, so it would have cost about a quarter million to get into it.

##### [00:05:53.410] - Kristina Gaardbo

It's a little expensive for a hobby. So we decided to focus more on the food aspect of it, and friends and family would come over. We found out how much we loved entertaining. We'd spend the whole time doing the food, making sure everybody was happy and fed. They'd bring their crap beer like Coors Light, Bud Light and drink all of our beautiful craft beer. So our fridge would all have now, like, Stella and Corona in it. But we really enjoyed it. And my husband is just a creative genius and always looking to do something new.

##### [00:06:24.190] - Kristina Gaardbo

So he wanted to get into barbecue catering, and I flat out said, no, I was like, no, no way. There's too many barbecue places. And when I was looking around the barbecue places, a lot of them, they're not very expensive. And I'm like, we're going to get nickel and dime. It's just not worth it. Go back to the drawing board. So he went back and came back with Churrasco. If you've ever heard of Brazilian barbecue like Fogo de Chao or Texas De Brazil. So we got a Churrasco. We didn't get it imported from Brazil to start. I thought it was too expensive to do that. I'm very frugal, and I have time management and all that wonderful stuff that I was taught by my father and by Harper College. So we had one made in the United States. It did not last long because them not knowing how Churrascaria really works. They did not insulate the back where the gears are. That turned the skewers. And so luckily, we're doing events with Harley Davidson at the time. So every time that the gears needed to be greased up and fixed, we would just take it to Harley Davidson, and they would fix it up for us.

##### [00:07:19.330] - Kristina Gaardbo

They got a lot of free catering out of that. And eventually we got a couple from Brazil, had them imported, and they worked much better. But we needed a commissary. So we got our original location at 773 North Quentin, actually, to do commissary and have a licensed kitchen to do all of our food prep for the Churrasco Catering Company, which we called Rockin' Rodizio.

##### [00:07:40.690] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, I remember very early. I saw the restaurant over there on Quentin, but I wasn't sure what you folks were doing. I didn't know what was going on over there. I didn't know about that side of your business that you had running there. And then I remember driving past one day on Quenton and seeing a line of people and the sign that says Chicago Culinary Kitchen and a barbecue sign. And I'm from the south. So I'm very, very weary of Northerners doing barbecue because there are a lot of barbecue places around, but very few of them are good.

##### [00:08:14.770] - Brian Shelton

And so I went over one day to check you folks out and stood in line and I got your brisket and I was like, oh, my goodness, this is the best barbecue that I think I've ever had in my life. It's certainly the best barbecue outside of Texas that I've ever had in my life. And I was really blown away that something like that existed here in Palatine, Illinois. I mean, it's pretty amazing what you're doing there.

##### [00:08:35.410] - Kristina Gaardbo

Yeah, we switched to the barbecue because we missed the whole backyard aspect of it and the actual entertaining, like in our house that commissary. We then changed into an event space. So we had to go back to the village, change our business plan. I got really good at writing business plans. Every time we changed something, we had to go back. So in October 2016, when we opened the event space to start doing barbecue, we had never smoked a brisket or pork butt before that, we always did indirect smoking and with indirect smoking, like, we don't want to be outside for 15 hours, 18 hours overnight in the elements.

##### [00:09:09.970] - Kristina Gaardbo

So we always did, like ribs and chicken. So we bought our first commercial smoker and started playing around with pork butts and briskets and just started doing beer paired classes with the barbecue. And, like, four months later, it was actually my popular demand of people just asking us, please, please just open as a restaurant, sell your barbecue. We only have one full time job. We don't have anything going on in the weekends. Let's do barbecue on the weekends. And so that's why people would line up as we were only open three days or two days a week for 3 hours each day, 11:00 a.m. to sell out, which typically was around 02:00 p.m. Because we only did one run of barbecue, and we don't hold it. It's not like we're going to go back and microwave you a plate of brisket. When it's gone, it's gone.

##### [00:09:52.030] - Brian Shelton

Please don't microwave my briskets.

##### [00:09:53.530] - Kristina Gaardbo

No, Chef Mike is not here.

##### [00:09:56.410] - Brian Shelton

My folks were up this summer, and I took them over to your place, the old place on Quinton, and they tried to barbecue, and they're like, oh, this is the best. This is amazing. So, yeah, you were doing really great stuff over there, and then you open up the new place over on Lake Cook. Did you just outgrow the other space?

##### [00:10:18.310] - Kristina Gaardbo

So with that being a side business when we started, we just kept reinvesting any of our profit back into the business and trying to meet the demands that people were asking anything. That was an issue. Not enough seating, not long enough hours, not enough food. We actually looked into opening a full time restaurant back in 2019. And the place we are looking at just didn't work out. And so we said, you know what? We'll get a food truck because catering and events good money in that we can extend our reach without having a permanent fixture somewhere.

##### [00:10:49.810] - Kristina Gaardbo

And so yeah, really, to say, we came full circle back to meeting a full size restaurant. And we actually signed the lease right before COVID in January. So right, as COVID was hitting, we now are going to be paying rent in another space that we had to build out during all this lovely pandemic stuff. Very interesting. Yeah.

##### [00:11:13.390] - Brian Shelton

Such a weird time to be starting a business, right. Or restarting a business, I guess building a building a different business. It's been so weird. How's it been going over there at the new space.

##### [00:11:23.410] - Kristina Gaardbo

It's been going great. I'm not going to lie was a little nervous about opening for lunch on weekdays. Like, who's going to come on a weekday and Wednesday at 11:00 a.m.. And you know what? There's a crowd. I don't know where the people come from, but we've got a great location. We're located right off 53 at Lake Cook and Hicks. So it's kind of like the end of the universe, the first stop when you get off and the last stop when you get on. So why not stop for some food before you go into your final destination

##### [00:11:50.050] - Brian Shelton

And you get a great patio there as well. So that's fun.

##### [00:11:53.290] - Kristina Gaardbo

The patio is a lifesaver that was big, especially during COVID.

##### [00:11:56.590] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, absolutely. You got to tell me about this beef Tallow cake.

##### [00:12:01.450] - Kristina Gaardbo

Okay.

##### [00:12:03.550] - Brian Shelton

What's the story there? When I saw your social media post about it, I was like, what the heck is she doing there? But it sounds good.

##### [00:12:10.510] - Kristina Gaardbo

We always like to experiment and have fun here and play with recipes. We are brand ambassadors for Certified Angus Beef. We get all of our beef products from Certified Angus Beef. It's a very high quality. They've got ten points that they try to meet with their cattle so that the final product is actually more guaranteed to be tender and juicy. And so they're located in Wooster for their culinary center. And so we go down there and we play with stuff and try and invent things and everything.

##### [00:12:39.610] - Kristina Gaardbo

They have what they call the Innovator of the Year award. And so my husband and I were very big on trying to figure out, how can we win this award? What can we do? What can we do? So we started playing with things. He's playing with steaks. And we're talking one time. And we're like, what about, like, sweet and savory desserts. And we're trying to figure out how we can incorporate and we're like, well, you know what? Why don't we just replace Tallow, which is beef fat for the butter in the cake batter and beef fat, especially the brisket.

##### [00:13:05.590] - Kristina Gaardbo

It's like, the most best fat you can get. It's like, avocado fat. So I started playing with replacing with the butter and then decided, okay, let's take this another step forward. Like, okay, what else can I do? And I'm like, Well, sweet and savory caramelized onions can be sweet. So can garlic kind of onions and garlic go together. So start soft hanging onions and garlic and Tallow. Made a caramel sauce from that by adding sugar and then heavy whipping cream and a little bit of salt, because I wanted that salty flavor, like a salted caramel.

##### [00:13:39.130] - Kristina Gaardbo

Use that for the filling. And then because of the chocolate stout cake, I wanted to make sure that I brought back that whole stout flavor. So I made a buttercream frosting with a little bit of cocoa powder and espresso kind of put it all together for the innovator cake. I did use schmacin, which is beef bacon because it needs all of you about beef. But when I've done it here, it's been hard to get a hold of some beef products during these times. So we've used pig candy, which is the pork side of it. Candied bacon as the garnish.

##### [00:14:06.610] - Brian Shelton

Well, it looks fantastic, and it sounds fantastic. I've got to get over there and get a slice of it. How often do you have that available?

##### [00:14:12.190] - Kristina Gaardbo

We do it as a rotating special on the weekends. If you follow us on Facebook or if you're on our email heads up list, you'll get any of those heads up kind of like, hey, this is what's coming next is what you need to come and get in line for. We've now been doing specials, at least savory specials all throughout the week and not just on the weekends. And eventually we will be doing desserts specials during the week and not just on the weekends as well.

##### [00:14:35.350] - Brian Shelton

That's fun.

##### [00:14:35.830] - Kristina Gaardbo

Just trying to get everything together.

##### [00:14:37.570] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's a lot. I've worked in the culinary field throughout my life, and it's hard, exhausting work. How do you keep up the energy? Aren't you tired?

##### [00:14:49.390] - Kristina Gaardbo

Especially because we have two different companies and they're completely different. Luckily, Shockwaves, I just have to go there about once a week, and I basically move money around do AP/AR payroll, but, yeah, it's just you get up and you just be excited about what you're doing. And we have a great staff behind us. My husband has a lot of energy, too. He's always helping drive me, and I'm helping drive him. But with the growth of the restaurant, we have had to grow our team. And so it's not always us that have to be here at 530 in the morning, six in the morning, and our smokers are gas assisted.

##### [00:15:21.370] - Kristina Gaardbo

So there's nobody that's sitting here overnight on a cot stoking the fire with wood. We simply use the wood for that flavoring and that smoke flavor. Yeah.

##### [00:15:29.110] - Brian Shelton

So speaking of staffing, we mentioned the pandemic earlier and what that was like opening a store? How has that affected you? Staffing wise. Has it been hard to get good people?

##### [00:15:40.970] - Kristina Gaardbo

It's been easier to get them for the restaurant. Shockwaves is a little bit more difficult. Nobody wants work. I don't know if they all just saved up their unemployment money or whatnot. There's a little game that I played on indeed. And Craigslist and Zip recruiter where I would pretend people are interested in working. So I would put an ad up and then they pretended they were interested in having an interview. So they would contact me half the time. They wouldn't show up to the interview. And then three quarter time they showed up for the interview.

##### [00:16:08.810] - Kristina Gaardbo

They may not show up to the job if they got hired. I had one day where I had hired three people. They're supposed to start the next day. None of them showed up. There were also two interviews that were supposed to be for the next day, and none of them showed up. Yeah, it's interesting. We'll see. I thought the unemployment stuff was supposed to end in September, but I don't know. People got used to not working, I guess. Yeah.

##### [00:16:29.270] - Brian Shelton

Or have figured out something else. I'm not sure what they figured out because the unemployment numbers haven't really gone down. But. It seems that everyone is having trouble getting staffing. It seems the restaurant industry has been hurt the worst by that.

##### [00:16:42.350] - Kristina Gaardbo

Yeah, I definitely agree with you. We have friends that have restaurants that are having the same struggles that we were having. Our staff here is great. We treat them like family. They get paid well. Plus, they share tips. So it's a great place to work. It's a fun environment. You're looking at corporate right now. There's no, like heavy boss that's walking around yelling at people. We're all here to have fun and just work together and have one common goal to feed people, make them happy and make some money.

##### [00:17:08.210] - Brian Shelton

That's great. So I read in your bio that being at Harper and in the nursing program taught you the essential skills of time management and relationship building. Is that something you think is needed more from students? Especially when you look at your hiring people that they maybe lack. That when they come to you.

##### [00:17:26.330] - Kristina Gaardbo

The time management goes for everything goes for hiring people. Being the owner of two companies, I would love to be in the back kitchen, cooking all the time. That's not my job right now. Right now, I've got to hire people for two different companies. I have to plan out schedules. I have to figure out events for catering. It's lucky that I have such a great staff that has taken some of that stuff off of my plate. Operation managers are awesome. All managers are awesome. It's one thing to delegate some of the work that I used to have to do myself.

##### [00:17:59.690] - Kristina Gaardbo

Still don't have a lot of free time for myself, but that's okay. We are loving what we do, and we're getting there. We're getting there. We're actually talking about opening, maybe a second location, different kind of concept. So lots of fun things still in the works. We'll need to be hiring people for that, too. So if you are looking for a job and you're in the restaurant industry or even not, they'll teach you. We just need people who want to work.

##### [00:18:21.950] - Brian Shelton

I always found all the restaurant jobs that I work to be a lot of fun. I mean, it's hard work, but it's a lot of fun. So your place is definitely a good place to be.

##### [00:18:29.570] - Kristina Gaardbo

A lot of cleaning.

##### [00:18:30.350] - Brian Shelton

A lot of cleaning.

##### [00:18:31.130] - Kristina Gaardbo

You got to keep everything clean.

##### [00:18:32.690] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, absolutely. What advice would you give to a student who's going to Harper College right now about school, work? What have you.

##### [00:18:43.310] - Kristina Gaardbo

Have some idea if you can of where you want to end up with what you're doing? If you're going to school for nursing, get your foot in the door someplace that you want to work. When I was going to nursing school, I was still working as a vet tech. My grades were impeccable, but I could not get in to a hospital because I was not currently working at the hospitals. The hospitals were looking to hire their CNAs. They were looking to hire within. So you might have this great plan of what you want to do once you get your education.

##### [00:19:11.690] - Kristina Gaardbo

But you need to start thinking about where you want to work and start reaching out and making those contacts. Volunteer. Whatever you have to do to get your foot in the door, start figuring out where you want to work, who you want to work for, and it might even help you figure out if you're getting into the right field, keep your options open. Yeah.

##### [00:19:26.810] - Brian Shelton

There's nothing worse than going to school. And then when you get that first job, you're like, Gee, I don't really want to do this right.

##### [00:19:32.330] - Kristina Gaardbo

Or you go get, like, a marine biology. But you're living in Iowa. You're like, oh, what am I going to do with this here? Maybe the aquarium? I don't know.

##### [00:19:43.370] - Brian Shelton

Or the aquarium store.

##### [00:19:44.870] - Kristina Gaardbo

Maybe. There you go. Petco Petco.

##### [00:19:48.650] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. I've interviewed so many entrepreneurs for this show, and I'm always kind of amazed and in awe of people who are entrepreneurs because it scares me. It terrifies me. There's a reason I don't own a business, right? Like, how do you get over that fear of just going out and doing that? How did you and Greg do that? Obviously, Greg had a business before when you met, but I don't know. I don't have what it takes to do that. How did you get what it takes to do that?

##### [00:20:19.430] - Kristina Gaardbo

It took me a while to figure out that I did have it, but I needed that push from my husband. What's the worst that can happen? You can fail, and then you pick yourself up and you do something else and if you need to find a job in the meantime, while you're trying to figure that back out. I mean, there's lots of jobs right now, but do what you love. Have fun with it. Like I said, the worst thing that can happen is that you fail. But at least you might find something else new about yourself, about what you like.

##### [00:20:47.070] - Kristina Gaardbo

You might find something about people you want to work with or something you want to do. It's life. You get one chance to go around at it. Might as well live it to the fullest and push some boundaries, see what you can do. Yeah.

##### [00:20:57.810] - Brian Shelton

You're certainly doing that right.

##### [00:20:59.670] - Kristina Gaardbo

Yeah.

##### [00:21:00.390] - Brian Shelton

Well, I want to thank you so much for taking the time out. I know that you're very, very busy. So I don't want to keep you very long. And I know that you can get the restaurant open here in about an hour when we're doing the interview today. So I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to speak with us for Harper Talks. And I wish you all the best. And hopefully I can get some of that cake in the next week or two.

##### [00:21:20.070] - Kristina Gaardbo

Well, I hope I'll see you here soon. Thank you so much.

##### [00:21:23.610] - Brian Shelton

Thank you.

##### [00:21:24.270] - Brian Shelton

Kristina Gaardbo is a graduate of the Harper Nursing Program and is co-owner of Chicago Culinary Kitchen in Palatine, Illinois. If you're enjoying Harper Talks, please subscribe. And while you're at it rate and review us so that others might find us, Harper Talks is a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. Our technical producer is Erik Bonilla Sanchez. This episode was edited by Brian Diaz. Our online content producer is Ashley Rosenthal. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.