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People: Culver's couple

Former model and husband made move to Michigan to open franchise

Erin Schultz | for NOISE

Cory Chvala (pronounced 'koala') is a college dropout and former punk rocker. His wife January is a former model. Together, the young couple -- he's 27, she's 28 -- are into their third year as Culver's franchisees in Okemos.

Based near Madison, Wis., Culver's is a fast-growing chain of restaurants specializing in Butter Burgers (the butter's on the toasted bun, not the burger), frozen custard desserts and quick, quality service.

The Chvalas pursued owning a Culver's franchise because of their backgrounds in customer service and well, a mutual love of fried cheese curds.

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(Jeremy Herliczek | NOISE)

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And from hosting Harley motorcycle and classic Corvette shows in the parking lot to giving restaurant tours to elementary-age kids, the Wisconsin natives enjoy staying active in their new hometown. NOISE recently talked to the Chvalas about how they ended up in Michigan, the similarities between Madison and the Lansing area and their management philosophy.

Q. Culver's is a Wisconsin-based establishment, and you're both from Wisconsin. How did you end up in Okemos?

A. Cory: Unless you're an existing franchise in Wisconsin, you're not

allowed to own a store. So we were looking at other states, and Culver's was targeting Michigan,

Ohio, Indiana, for a lot of their expansion. When we opened in 2004, I think we were the seventh store in Michigan. Now there's 15 or 16, and there's a ton more coming. ... We chose this area because, for me, specifically, it's a Big Ten community, it's the capital, (it) has about the same amount of people (as Madison), kind of the same latitude as Madison so the weather's pretty much the same. It's very similar to where we're from. That was a good thing for us.

Q. You both went to school at the University of Wisconsin. What were your career prospects?

A. Cory: Drinking and staying out late. No, really ... it was general studies. I went because that was what everybody was supposed to do. I always knew I would be successful, but I didn't know how.

January: I always figured that we'd be entrepreneurs, doing something in customer service.

Cory: Yes. We had the fire in us to hustle. Serving, delivering pizzas, whatever ... the hustle game. Work hard, get paid money. We didn't know if we'd do retail or food. But you know, everybody will always need to eat. And choosing to do franchising was natural ... it was very easy.

Q. January, you were once a model. Was that your dream growing up?

A. January: No, I thought I'd be a lawyer. I was going to school for international relations and political science. I started modeling as a side job. I was doing that when (Cory and I) met, started dating. I'd do work for local salons, things like that. ... I started at about \$85 an hour.

Q. Why did you get out of it?

A. January: It was shady. And I weighed probably 105 pounds, and it was still not good enough.

Cory: I kind of put my foot down too, once we got serious with each other. They wanted her to go out to bars and hand out drinks all by herself -- just not cool.

January: It was getting pretty rough. They wanted me to do Hawaiian Tropic Bikini contests at bars, and I wouldn't do it. And they said, "but we're paying you to do it. Other girls are going to sign up to do it once they see that you guys are doing it." I still said no.

Q. As owners and managers, do you guys work behind the counter at all, or do you take the omnipotent-manager approach?

A. Cory: I was in the kitchen all day for lunch. I clean the bathrooms, I do whatever it takes. That's the biggest thing that (January) and I impress on our staff ... I'm not above anything. When I get an attitude from an individual -- "I don't want to do this, I don't want to do that," I'll say, "that's fine, I'll do it this time, but next time, you're doing it without saying no." My biggest thing is leading by example through our actions.

January: Exactly. I'd never ask anybody to do anything I wouldn't do myself.

Q. I notice you have bussers ... I've never seen that at McDonald's.

A. Cory: It's not mandatory, it's just something we do. My background is more of a full-service background. We tend to bring that into the restaurant as much as possible. We even do small things like doing roll-ups with paper napkins and plastic silverware. ... It just looks nicer, travels nicer. It's higher end, in that way.

Q. I was always confused about this place because I thought it was a "Wal-Mart restaurant."

A. Cory: Oh, no. ... We're independently owned and operated. We are a franchise, but Wal-Mart doesn't own (it). The inside is (a typical Culver's design), but the outside is not. Usually (Culver's) restaurants have a white brick. We had to use a reddish-tinted brick.

Q. There are tons of fast food restaurants already existing on this strip by the mall here. Were you afraid of that competition?

A. Cory: No. We're not fast food. We're not in the same category food quality-wise with what (major fast food chains) do. All of our beef is fresh, never frozen. It's cooked to order - not in regards to medium, medium rare, but if you order a burger, we cook it and bring it out to you. Nothing sits in a steam table - all of our burgers are hand-pressed, seared onto a grill. And it's domestic beef - all of it comes from within 100 miles of Omaha, Neb. If you order a salad here, we make the salad. You can have it however you want it. If you want something with different condiments on it, you can have that - it's not a problem.

Q. You lived a nice laid-back existence in Arizona for a while before committing yourself to Culver's. Why did you come back to the Midwest?

A. Cory: We missed the hustle and bustle. That's really what (factored into us) being our own business owners too. (If) you work and put in the time and effort - the sky really is the limit. ...

Q. Are you happy here, so far?

A. Cory: We love it. We live out in Haslett and really like it.

January: Great neighborhood, great neighbors.

Q. Must have been hard to leave the hometown, though...

A. Cory: Yes. Madison was a hard city to leave. It's probably one of the best cities in the country. Wisconsin people are just very friendly, but I really do enjoy the people out here.

Q. I know you have plans to open up another store in the area. Where will it be?

A. Cory: I want the next location to be an 'A' location - I want it to be on Lake Lansing, on Saginaw, on the interstate. Where we sit now, it's a nice location, but this is really more like a family restaurant - we don't have random interstate traffic stops by here at all. You can get an extra 50 cars a day just off the interstate - and that'd be a whole new ball game.

Q. It sounds like you plan on being here for a while then. Do you have any plans to go back to Wisconsin, long-term?

A. Cory: No ... we'll be around. I'm very impressed with the Haslett school system. I could see us living in our house for a while and having some children - right now, we're the only people in our neighborhood without kids.

January: We bought our house knowing that between us now and us having kids, we wouldn't have to relocate. We got the house to raise a family. And this year will be nice. We haven't really had a chance to venture around Michigan besides this little pocket. ... We know the Culver's owner

in Traverse City, and we've been invited to go up there. I think that will only make us like Michigan more.

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