

# LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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PORTRAIT OF NEW  
WEST LAWRENCE





The Salty Iguana

# In Good Company

by Nick Spacek, photos by Steven Hertzog and Nick Spacek

**Construction of Rock Chalk Park and the continuing expansion of housing near the intersection of Sixth and Wakarusa have contributed greatly to the success of its local food and beverage businesses.**

During the last 25 years, the intersection at Sixth and Wakarusa streets in West Lawrence has grown from empty fields to a collection of shopping complexes, rivaling the more established south Iowa corridor. Beginning with the development of the Wakarusa Commons by the Bristol Groupe in 1996, at the southwest corner, followed by the Westgate Shopping Center in 1999, on the southeast corner, it seemed as though the west side of Lawrence was ending the millennium on an upswing.

However, a Walmart store at the northwest corner of the intersection originally proposed in March 2003 would see more than half a decade of legal wrangling and community discussion before it eventually opened in April 2009.

Originally opposed by an organization called “Citizens for a Sane Sixth and Wakarusa,” which was against the proposal by developers The Peridian Group, the initial 2003 defeat would see backing from the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce and recommendations against such a development by the Kansas Department of Transportation, with state officials writing, “The demand is being allowed to outstrip the supply, and failure of the arterial corridor will be the result.”

After plans reduced the size of the building to half of the initial plan of 200,000 square feet, the store would eventually open in April 2009, a full three years after another development, Bauer Farms, was opened at the intersection’s northeast corner.

It’s been something to watch, says Dan Chandler, owner of the Salty Iguana, 4931 W. Sixth St. As one of the first tenants in the Wakarusa Commons center, he’s had the

long view ever since he began the improvements to move into the space 23 years ago. He chose what was, at the time, a remote spot because he feels he knows Lawrence well.

“I felt like that was the area where rooftops are going to explode, which has proven out,” Chandler explains from his retirement home of California. “That was where all the growth was. All the restaurants were over on the other side, but we always look at rooftops. Mom and Dad, and two kids—that’s what we’re after, so that’s why we chose it.”

In Salty Iguana’s two decades-plus in Wakarusa Commons, Chandler has seen a lot come and go as his restaurant has become the granddaddy of the Sixth and Wakarusa dining establishments. There’s been turnover two or three times, he says, not only in shops but in ownership of the center. However, while one might’ve expected

Walmart to bring business to his side of town, Chandler points to the construction of Rock Chalk Park as being the real game changer for his and the surrounding businesses.

“I would say that Rock Chalk Park changed the demographics, because after KU was not in session, the summer months used to be just horrific for sales,” Chandler recalls. “And now, with the center being out there (near) Rock Chalk Park, summer months are not near as bad as what they used to be.”

While that’s the biggest change, Chandler goes back to the rooftop explosion he’d anticipated all those years before: “The rooftops have grown around us, and people don’t like to drive clear to the other side of town to eat. It’s gotta be something special for them to go over there, because there’s many options now in Lawrence.”





Steven Cramer, owner of J&S Coffee greeting a customer  
 Customers sit outdoors,  
 Steven and his staff, from left to right: Janessa Picotte, Sam Cramer, Steven Cramer, Mayzie Herremann (front kneeling), Mason Fowler (back row), Halli Horner (middle row), JT Jones  
 Barista Halli prepares a capucino, and booths line the back wall inside J&S



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## Survive and Thrive

Steven Cramer, owner of J&S Coffee (4821 W. Sixth St.), agrees. While he's only owned his store for about five years after purchasing it from original owners, Joe and Sarah Farthing, in 2017, Cramer sees Sixth and Waka-rusa as an excellent location, especially for his particular business. For him, it wasn't so much a decision as an opportunity to take over an already-thriving business.

"I think that was a very good decision, because that particular area has continued to develop and grow," Cramer says. "It's actually one of the best places in Lawrence right now with a lot of convenience stores and food, and places like that. Very nice area to be in."

He points to the same things Salty Iguana's Chandler did, the housing expansion and Rock Chalk Park, having contributed to the uptick in people coming through his doors.

"One of the biggest things is a tremendous number of condos and apartments that have been built farther out toward Rock Chalk and farther out," Cramer explains. "Five years ago, a lot of those condos and apartments that are out there didn't exist yet."

The residential construction continued to increase as the commercial was built up, he continues, adding that the whole section around Walmart, with Old Chicago and Spin Pizza, was all built after he purchased J&S Coffee. "It has continued to grow, but the residential expansion, I think, was a big trigger on that just because there's so many more living units out there."

Those living units bring folks into J&S, he says, but so does Rock Chalk.

"A lot of people come in for coffee after their workout," Cramer says. "A great many of those were at Rock Chalk, but there's also other gyms in the area, as well. We have an incredible clientele, and we have a very universal demographic and sociocultural mix."

He says he feels Rock Chalk has helped the prestige of the neighborhood, and it's a major reason why more condos and apartment are being built.

"Without question, that's a huge amenity, being that it's community-based and half university-based," Cramer says.





J. Wilson's owners Rick and Nancy Renfro with Manager Lisa Wall

## Not Another Sports Bar

Rick Renfro is co-owner with his wife, Nancy, of J. Wilson's (4821 W. Sixth St. Suite A), located just west of J&S in Westgate. The space used to be the fine-dining establishment Mariscos until a rebranding six years ago. Renfro is a member of the Johnny's Group, which owns 13 Johnny's Taverns in the Kansas City-Lawrence metro area, including Johnny's West (721 Wakarusa), which is located right across Wakarusa from J. Wilson's.

"The first shopping complex that came out here was across the street over there, built by DiVilbiss (of The Bristol Groupe)," Renfro says, pointing to Wakarusa Commons. "That was that whole big thing over there. And they opened a bar, and there was nothing on this corner. There was nothing on that corner. Walmart wasn't here—none of that stuff."

JB Stouts, an upscale sports bar, was the main anchor at the south end, he explains, along with Hereford House as the north anchor. The steak house struggled for a time before closing, with a series of restaurants—including a Famous Dave's barbecue franchise—opening and shuttering before Six Mile Chop House finally succeeded.

JB Stouts was started by the eventual owner of Six Mile, Brad Ziegler, who was in partnership with two others. Knowing that Westgate would be coming in, they didn't want another sports bar with which to compete, so the trio went to the Johnny's Group hoping to open a fine-dining restaurant to lock up the space, but one of the partners didn't want to go in.

"They came to the Johnny's Group and talked us into buying a third of JB Stouts and a third of this, which was called Mariscos," Renfro explains. "We've been here six years as [J. Wilson's], and we were here for 12 or 13 years as Mariscos, so 20 years-plus."

He says Mariscos went really well, but it was slow in the early days of Sixth and Wakarusa's expansion. "I felt sorry for Dillons, because I didn't think they were gonna make it, and now they're ... the busiest Dillons store

in town. The last 20 years, we've seen this whole corner rise up, and it's all supported by all these housetops."

While Mariscos did well enough, after a while, it was time to rebrand, Renfro says. He attributes that restaurant's longevity to "deep pockets," but the rebrand to J. Wilson's let the restaurant become an adjunct not only to the Johnny's franchise but also to what Renfro himself enjoys.

"I think a lot of it has to do with me personally," the restaurateur says, "because I like to go to a beer joint, like Johnny's in North Lawrence, but I also like to go to an upscale sports bar that has all the TVs going and all that. Then, I also enjoy fine dining, so it's perfect."

Renfro recalls not only the buildup of the corners on which his restaurant exists but also that of the Walmart across the street. When Mariscos first opened, the only thing at the northwest corner was a big shed with a dirt floor used by the University of Kansas rugby team for practice space, he remembers. However, that ties into the grander plan for Johnny's as it has expanded.

"When we started expanding our Johnny's stuff, typically we've gone in on the outskirts of wherever something's going on in Johnson County or Kansas City, and we've had to wait until it came to us," Renfro explains. "I was used to that, and I knew that was gonna happen."

It was a little longer here than Renfro thought it was going to be, he admits, saying that if he was the lone financial decision-maker, he would've gotten out and walked away from it a decade ago.

"But because I was able to hang in there, I figured it was gonna come," he says. Given that early expansions in Kansas City happened at 119th and Glenwood, and on Ridgeview Road in Olathe—two locations where there was next to nothing nearby—only to see massive growth and expansion in the years since they opened, one has to admit that Renfro certainly knows about what he speaks.







Steve Wilson, co-owner of City Wine Market prepares for a wine tasting in their tasting room



### Neighborhood Hub

Steve Wilson, co-owner of City Wine Market (4821 W. Sixth St. Suite N), might have placed the business he and Jamie Routledge started in 2010 at their location for different reasons, but it's been no less successful.

"We were wanting a West Lawrence location," Wilson explains. "This is less significant, but we wanted it north-facing so that we didn't have sun shining in our windows, which damages liquor products; but we really wanted to find a hub for neighborhoods."

The store is more of a bottle shop where he and Routledge hand-select everything, he points out, as opposed to a regular liquor store. So with the layout of the location and how it's situated, he says it's been great for them.

"We have access to a wide array of neighborhoods in West Lawrence because of Sixth and Wakarusa," Wilson says. Interestingly, he offers another perspective on what's driven growth in the area. While acknowledging that Rock Chalk Park plays a big role in helping drive business to the intersection, he points out that West Lawrence, and the area where City Wine Market is located, is a unique opportunity for expansion.

"It makes sense," he explains. "It's one of the areas in Lawrence that doesn't butt up against a river or another river. Basically, you've got the Kansas River in the north and the Wakarusa in the south, and that kind of boxes you in. Eudora is to the east, so the west is really the place that growth most logically would happen. And the location has, like I said, provided us great access to that growth."

### View From the Top

These business owners have rolled with the many changes on the west side, and they've managed to remain stable.

"I live in West Lawrence, my business partner and I went to high school in Lawrence, and we can remember back when Wakarusa was largely dark and bordered by fields," City Wine Market's Wilson recalls. "Just seeing what had happened even up to the middle 2000s was pretty impressive. In looking at Westgate Center, we looked at who was in that center, and they were businesses that would not compete with ours. They would be, in some cases, very complementary. Most of the businesses that we looked at as great examples of the success of that shopping center are still there today, which is not totally typical in retail."

"I was the sole owner of Mariscos for four years," says Renfro of J. Wilson's. "Prior to that, I had partners, but I feel like this is a continuation of that original business. I haven't changed my kitchen hardly at all. We got all new booths and furniture and all that—new floor, new walls—but the bones were there. So I think it's been longer in my mind than seven years. I think I'm over the hump. I think this place will be all right."

"I consider ourselves fortunate that we're in the midst of that whole coffee culture of Lawrence," J&S Coffee's Cramer says. "It's a lot of fun because I hear stories—everybody's story. People are phenomenal, if you understand some of the background of some of the people that you're sitting with."

We have a lot of people ask us if we were sad to leave Seattle, and yes, we were sad to leave Seattle. We loved it. It was hard to leave there, but it was very easy to move back to Lawrence." ▲



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