

### Stefani Watson: “Mom” of the Barn

Hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, wearing a horse charm necklace and mud scuffed boots, Stefani Watson, sits on the front steps of Cazenovia College Equestrian Center, soaking up the sun and watching the horses play in the fields. As Cazenovia Equestrian Center farm Operations Manager and coach of the college’s dressage team, Watson has her hands full. Not only does she take care of the 70 horses that reside on the 240-acre farm, but she also teaches two academic classes, is in charge of planning and budgeting for the Equestrian Center, manages personnel, and coaches the dressage team which has three members competing in the Intercollegiate Dressage Association (IDA) Nationals in eleven days. Dressage is a discipline of riding that consists of the horse and rider executing precise movements on the ground in a graceful and fluid manner. One of the major goals of a dressage rider is to have the horse react to the smallest, almost imperceivable, commands from the rider, so it appears that the horse is executing the movements on its own.

“Ms. Watson has a large job overseeing everything here which has a plethora of moving parts... it is her job to keep all the balls in the air, and that requires being able to be mentally nimble,” said Barb Lindbergh, the Equestrian Program Director and long time friend of Watson. Yet, both women agree that “mental nimbleness” is easier on some days than others. The hardest part of Watson’s job is “probably the people” she said. “Horses are easy and predictable. Horses are pretty much the same every day. In this situation, we’re not a boarding barn. It’s nice because all of the horses are owned by Caz College so you’re not dealing with borders’ needs and wants, but you trade that for the students and their emotions and their stress. A huge chunk of my job is being a therapist to students. That is not something that I necessarily went to school for. It’s virtually psychology, so especially in this day and age, it’s a huge part of what we do” said Watson.

Stefani Watson was born on August 21, 1980, in Chester, Massachusetts. She recalls first falling in love with horses as a girl at her neighbor’s farm. “Driving by there every day, it was like the place I had

to be, so as soon as I could get on my bike and go down the road by myself I was gone. I would go to their house every day and offer to muck stalls and do whatever for just 30 seconds in the saddle” said Watson. She later went to school at Johnson Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island where she graduated with an associate's degree in Equine Studies and bachelor's degree in Equine Business Management.

At Johnson Wales, Watson fell in love with dressage. Watson spent her last semester of college riding in Germany at the International School of Equestrian Studies. She said, “I rode five to seven horses a day. I would get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and have stalls and everything done by 8 o'clock, have breakfast, and then just ride horses all afternoon.” Europe is very well known for breeding competition horses and hosting huge auctions for very young and inexperienced horses. Watson explained that one of the coolest experiences she had in Germany was going to these auctions. The most expensive horse she saw sold was a three-year-old purchased by an American for \$300,000. She said, “at that age, the horse has proved nothing and it might not even make it across the ocean. People spend 3.75% of the horses' value just to insure it for a year.” These young horses have yet to even compete so there is a huge risk factor when purchasing them. Watson recalls being completely shocked by the amount of money people spend in this industry.

After Watson graduated from Johnson Wales, she took a full-time position there as a Facility Manager and Equine Admissions Liaison where she repeatedly encountered Cazenovia College at horse shows, thus she applied for a position at the college. “So instead of offering me the position I applied for, they offered me a position two positions higher. So there's the Equine Care Manager, then the Assistant Equine Care Manager, and then the farm Operations Manager, and I had applied for the Assistant Equine Manager position, but got put in the farm Operations Manager position” said Watson. In 2005 she moved to Cazenovia and has been there ever since.

Out of all of the things Watson does at Cazenovia College, her favorite part of the job is the horses. “The horses are easily my favorite part of the job and the staff. I love my staff, they're just fun. They're a great, super versatile group of people. They're just the group that makes you get up in the morning and say, ‘I'm going to play with friends’” said Watson. She also speaks very highly of the team she coaches, obviously very proud of their accomplishments. With three of her girls competing at Nationals in just a handful of days, Watson said there is a lot of preparation to be done but she is excited and believes in her riders. Dressage team captain, Mariana Reisacher said, “Honestly, Stef is so much more than just a coach. Her nickname is actually just ‘Mom,’ which speaks volumes about how important she is to us as a mentor as well as a coach. I remember the first time I ever sat in a dressage saddle was last year during tryouts, right after I'd told her I hadn't ever ridden dressage before. She shrugged it off and told me that everyone starts somewhere. And in a horse world that tells you money is God and if you haven't ridden your whole life you have no chance, Stef makes dressage possible for literally anyone who wants to try.”



Stefani Watson stands in front of the uniform white fences of the Cazenovia Equestrian Center as she prepares to start her day of caring for the facility and horses.

## Now Trending: Tacos

Nestled in between an old church and a BBQ house on East Fayette Street lays a new and trendy restaurant, XO Taco. This vibrant taco joint stands out against the grey street with a pop of its trademark: neon red lips. Once inside the restaurant, the energetic vibe is in full effect. Flashes of crimson stick out throughout the interior of the sheik restaurant; all of the lights hang from vivid red cords while the windows and walls are accented with neon signs that flicker against a simple ivy backdrop. Upon stepping inside this taco joint, customers are transported into a fresh and electrifying corner of Syracuse, New York.

“In my mind when you think of ‘xo’ you think of like hugs and kisses which is all sappy, but I felt like if you could really get that in your subconscious it could be really cool and fun and sexy. So that was the inspiration behind the name and the design” said Chris Bily, owner of XO Taco. Bily, a Syracuse native with a knack for culinary arts and a vision for edgy interior design, says he got into this business because of his love for food and writing menus. “I ended up in getting connected with some guys that were interested in doing a diner, so I pitched them a quick idea and that ended up being Modern Malt. That's kind of where I got started” said Bily. He now owns XO Taco as well as Original Grain, another extremely popular restaurant in Syracuse.

Yet, there are a total of 38 Mexican restaurants in the city of Syracuse, so what sets XO Taco apart? “The fact that we make our own tortillas. It completely sets us apart and above from everybody else in the city” is what General Manager, Maryanne Baxter said. She goes on about the sheer freshness and quality of the food being produced at XO Taco. “All of the produce comes in the back door in the morning, and it is made into fresh salsa and guacamole every day. It's instantaneous, it is everything that I'm passionate about when it comes to food. It is clean, it's fresh, it's real. There is not a preservative in this house and to have your tortillas made daily is amazing. I could take you out back right now and you could take a photo of the guy making tortillas and we're going through an average of 900 tortillas a week” said Baxter.

Opened on September 4, 2018, XO Taco has already established its presence as the place to be for dinner, brunch, and cocktail hour. XO Taco seats around 70 customers at a time and during peak nights they serve over 200 customers, bringing in around \$8,000 on a busy night. As the restaurant continues to expand its menu, its popularity increases and reaches more audiences. Andrew Lombardoizzi a regular customer at XO Taco described the restaurant as “a breath of fresh air in downtown Syracuse.” But, Lombardoizzi did criticize the Taco joint saying that “they could really use more space to entertain the crowds that come in.” Bily wants to expand XO Taco past Syracuse but does not have any plans to add on to the current location.

According to google reviews, XO Taco has 107 reviews with an average rating of 4.1 stars; there were 12 one-star reviews, 8 two-star reviews, 15 three-star reviews, and 72 five-star reviews. Customers who weren't satisfied with their service reported problems with the wait for seating and the lack of space in the restaurant as well as the expensive prices. But, most consumers report being extremely satisfied with the service and freshness of the food in combination with the stylish design.

“We had times when the only advertising we did was on social media, and there was a line out the door, we were actually turning people away it was crazy. I was understaffed and the was kitchen slammed and it was just, it was crazy. And I'm hoping the same reaction is going to happen for Cinco De Mayo” said Baxter. The next big thing for XO Taco is in the expansion of their cocktail menu and their big blowout for Cinco De Mayo. Bily said, “we're gonna keep expanding the menus, the ingredients, and the brand.” As the restaurant continues to grow, Baxter said, “we're going to do Sunday brunch and we are working on new cocktails, especially our new frozen cocktails which will be unveiled soon. I'm very excited about it. We are also working on doing pop-up Sundays sometimes and just different stuff, keeping on the path that we're on and hoping that it all grows every week which it has been, and also to just keep having fun and enjoying ourselves.”