

# Smoothie Shop or Sweet Escape?

A popular Chapel Hill, N.C. smoothie-bowl restaurant has thrived in a changing college-town setting, but looming construction plans threaten to upend its success.

The blare of familiar pop music and chatter of cheerful customers are the first sounds to welcome visitors to Chapel Hill, N.C., eatery, the Purple Bowl. The popular Franklin destination and smoothie-bowl shop stands out amongst a row of restaurants, donned appropriately with a logo that displays its most iconic dish, the açai bowl.

Greeting customers and fiddling with a receipt, owner Paula Gilland multitasked as she spoke, pausing only momentarily to shout, "Order for Katie! Order for Katie!" Catching her breath and mustering a genuine smile, she said, "How may I help you today?"

Despite appearing in need of a bit of assistance, herself, Gilland offered her service to all who entered her shop, whether paying customer or curious bystander. Purple Bowl regular, Lanier Hodgson, believes it's the ways in which Gilland "loves on people" that brings patrons back time and time again.

"I don't even like açai," she said. "But I come back for Paula and her team."

So, perhaps it's the way Gilland cares that explains the constant influx of customers that step through the door on a hot Wednesday afternoon. Or, perhaps, the allure of a cold, refreshing smoothie serves as sufficient explanation for the packed house on April 12, 2023. Either way, it would seem that Gilland has discovered some elusive, magic formula.

Now 6-years-old, the Purple Bowl has faithfully served the community of Chapel Hill, offering everything from smoothies to açai bowls and avocado toast.

"There's something for everyone," Gilland said. "Whether you're a young college student or older."

Especially popular among student-athletes, the Purple Bowl serves as a refuge-of-sorts for overworked and hungry collegiate competitors who rely on the eatery for healthy fuel.

Eva Klingbeil, a relative newcomer to Chapel Hill, claims the Purple Bowl "saved her."

A freshman on UNC's track & field team, Klingbeil attributes the smoothie-bowl shop for fueling her through an especially trying period of her life.

"Last semester was really hard for me," she said, referring to her first semester at the University.

A newcomer to the college environment, Klingbeil was initially overwhelmed by the intensity of the atmosphere coupled with a rigorous training schedule. And it had an impact on her health.

“I was in a pretty dark place,” she said. “But, when I found the Purple Bowl, I immediately felt welcomed.”

Gilland, herself, understands the demands placed on student-athletes. Her son, Taylor, inspired her initial interest in developing a restaurant with a mindful, healthy focus.

“He was running competitively at the University of Virginia and was trying to figure out ways to fuel his body well, so my husband and I became interested in nutrition.”

Experimenting with different options and recipes, Gilland and husband Wendell soon discovered the coveted açai bowl. As they began to test new creations, kitchen experimentation quickly developed into a genuine passion. Eventually, the pair desired to share their recipes with the greater Chapel Hill community and purchased real estate with the hopes of starting a restaurant business. And, just like that, the Purple Bowl was born.

Despite its humble beginnings, the business thrived amongst an array of Franklin Street businesses that were unable to survive the toll of the Coronavirus pandemic. Many Chapel Hill residents may remember [Ye Olde Waffle Shoppe and Spanky's restaurant](#), just a few of the eateries that failed to withstand the pandemic's financial repercussions. Yet, through it all, the Purple Bowl remained open and in operation, serving faithful customers throughout 2020 and beyond. And its growth shows no signs of stopping.

Having recently expanded into a vacant space, the Purple Bowl has grown considerably and now has the capacity to serve more eager patrons. To the regular customer and uninformed outsider, the business is thriving, surely unbound by the limits of its expanded interior. Few would guess that the successful eatery likely has few months in operation left.

Threatened by the looming plans of a local real estate company, Longfellow Real Estate Partners, the business will soon be out of commission if Chapel Hill's town council approves the company's proposal. Seeking to build a “life sciences center” on 306 W. Franklin St., and in the already-occupied space of Gilland's business, the real estate partners hope to bring more tax revenue to the town.

Scoffing at the idea, Gilland believes their plans to be a detriment to the community, more than anything else. “There's more ways to measure a community's success than through tax revenue,” she said. “Purple Bowl is a community center of Chapel Hill. We risk losing that.”

Community, to Gilland, is the most essential part, or the “secret sauce,” if you will, to building a successful business, like the Purple Bowl.

“We were open all throughout COVID,” she explained. “We were here for the community during one of the hardest times in our nation’s history.”

That, Gilland believes, was the key. Customers, she explained, saw how the business cared for Chapel Hill, remaining in operation despite nationwide pandemic and even (on a few occasions) providing food free of charge to hungry students.

Purple Bowl regulars Seth Davis and Nathan McWilliams expressed tremendous concern for the loss of community that they felt would occur pending the approval of Longfellow’s plans.

“Franklin Street wouldn’t be the same,” Davis said. “It’s just such a fun and welcoming place to come to.”

The two high schoolers frequent the smoothie shop, a place that serves as a solace-of-sorts for students desiring to escape the stress of day-to-day life.

Acknowledging the overwhelming presence of younger patrons, Davis said, “I mean, it’s not hard to see how popular it is.”

Whether a busy student, athlete, or local looking for a healthy bite to eat, the Purple Bowl has something for everyone. Klingbeil acknowledged the many times she would frequent the shop for a sweet escape, more than anything else. Regardless, the testimonies of its numerous customers reveal an environment that welcomes all and offers more than just “a bite to eat.”

Gilland offered one final thought on the business’ potential closure, saying that, while the outlook wasn’t necessarily bright, the impact of the community would almost certainly have some influence on the final decision.

“I really think it made a difference, I do,” she said.

While Franklin Street will continue to change and Purple Bowl may disappear, the impact the small business has had on the community will, undoubtedly, last a lifetime.

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