

Petersburg's Gluten Peddler Chef Ernie shares kitchen: Believes honesty is the best policy

Will Beaunuts Buttermilk Donuts owner become mayor someday? Which word drives him batty? Read answers to these quirky questions and more.



Kristi K. Higgins

The Progress-Index

Each year, I allow myself one apple fritter, usually during a beach trip. However, a Beaunuts Buttermilk Donuts Facebook post convinced me not to wait for summertime.

A selfie of Chef Ernie LaBrecque holding one of his Beaunuts creations caught my eye. Wondering why he had such a quirky facial expression, I read the post:

This Week's Speciality Offerings: Apple Pretty - buttermilk apple fritter tossed in cinnamon/sugar and glazed w/vanilla!!!! while supplies last - \$5.

There was no reason to continue reading the list of specials. He had me at apple fritter.

It was the perfect time to take the chef up on his offer to let me fry and decorate my own donut. Hmmm. I could eat the apple-fritterish donut plus the one I make. This is a win-win situation.



Gluten peddler

Ernie LaBrecque's fans call him Chef Ernie. He believes honesty is the best policy, so he refers to himself as a "gluten peddler."

The chef did not hesitate to provide me with a thrill, and we set a date. Unfortunately, by the time I arrived at 8 a.m., all of the apple fritter specialty donuts were sold out.

Next time, I am going to be a total foodie-diva and ask them to reserve one for me.

Making donuts is fun and pretty simple: don gloves, drop hand-laminated sweet southern biscuit dough into fryer basket, set timer, flip donut with tongs, set timer, lift and hang basket, grab a bowl, shake basket a little, and flip donut into the bowl.



I made two donuts. The first one I dipped in vanilla glaze and topped with Fruity Pebbles and cookies and cream. Chef Ernie asked me to pick another poison for my second one. I chose cinnamon and sugar.

The other toppings available were Rice Krispies, gummy worms, candy sprinkles and espresso dust.

The donuts tasted incredible! I've eaten my fair share of donuts, but Chef Ernie's are by far the best.

I appreciate Chef Ernie sharing his gift and time with me. It was an honor to train under someone who has a culinary degree from Le Cordon Bleu, one of the most renowned culinary schools in the country. The gluten peddler graduated valedictorian of his class.



Chef Ernie LaBrecque

Petersburg locals regularly spot Chef Ernie hanging out with friends and family in front of his business either seated at the bistro table or on or near his Harley-Davidson. He is a fascinating individual. If you ever get an opportunity to chat with him, go for it!

Chef Ernie began cooking at age 14, and it's all he's ever done with a couple of hiatuses.



"I tried to be a rock star and learned a trade that made me a bunch of money, but I absolutely hated it," Chef Ernie said. "I decided to take the industry seriously when I was 27 and went to culinary school."

The chef's inspiration came from his father.

"My dad is the pickiest eater on the planet. We only had about five meals in rotation in my household growing up. One day, I called my mom at work and asked if I could cook dinner, and she said yes," Chef Ernie shared.



After his dad loved the Cripple Creek Chicken recipe Chef Ernie selected out of a Betty Crocker Casserole cookbook, he was hooked.

Most of Chef Ernie's recipes are committed to memory, but the hard ones he writes down.

His top-selling donuts are banana pudding and anything with lemon or blueberry. The Humming Bird Beaunut is amazing according to Chef Ernie, but they don't make them often because the ingredients are expensive.

Other than donuts, the Carolina Dog is the most requested menu item, and their Beau-ldy Lox Breakfast Sandwich is a close second.

Fun facts about Chef Ernie

The word "politics" drives him batty when he hears it, and he has several pet peeves but prefers not to disclose them.

If Chef Ernie could select a different profession, he stated he would like to be the Mayor of Petersburg.



I asked Chef Ernie for his favorite color and he provided: black t-shirts, red classic cars and blond-ish significant others.

Few of his favorite things: Movie – "True Romance," Song – "Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman, Beaunuts menu item – newest creation, and non-Beaunuts food item – McDonald's Big Mac.

Water chestnuts are the chef's least-favorite food item.

Chef Ernie shared his personal mantra, "If you're not overprepared, then you're underprepared."



The chef takes his Harley-Davidson Road King for a spin as often as possible, and he plays his guitar every time he gets a chance.

"Instruments are always on the wall and available for anyone to play anytime we are open," Chef Ernie said. "I play the guitar and banjo mostly but I can make a racket with everything on there."

Beanuts hosts "The Todd Tipton Bluegrass Extravaganza" bluegrass jam every second Friday from 6:30 p.m. to midnight.

"There are usually four or five regulars that show up. We've had banjo players, mandolins, upright bass and there's never any lack of guitar pickers," Chef Ernie said. "Every now and again, we get newcomers."

All the musicians sing, but, according to the gluten peddler, some are worse than others.



Vegan menu item

"Vegan...the world's greatest carrot dog. We don't put it on the menu, but we always have it.," Chef Ernie said. "It's an incredibly long process which limits the amount we can have on hand, so we hide from the meat eaters."

Beaunuts vegan dogs are salt-cured for 24 hours, smoked for two hours, marinated for another 24 hours, deep-fried and served on a vegan potato roll.



Historic Petersburg fans

Both Chef Ernie and his wife KB LaBrecque, Beaunuts co-owner, love owning and operating their restaurant but admit that it is the hardest thing they have ever done.

The LaBrecques moved to Petersburg in 2015 and purchased their Victorian home on Franklin Street near the Centre Hill Museum entrance last year.

"Some have taken to calling it 'The Beutel California' or 'The Beaunuts Dread and Breakfast,' KB LaBrecque said.

The partners in life and business love Beaunut's location, their neighbors and being in the heart of Old Towne.



Their five-year-old son Bear and three-year-old daughter Marlowe are Beaunuts fans, also. If you ask me, having gluten peddlers as parents is way cool!

"One of the best things about owning our own spot is being able to surround ourselves with friends and family," Chef Ernie said.

Is Chef Ernie concerned about two new competitors in the area: Dunkin Donuts in Colonial Heights and another bakery on the same block?

"No... well ... I'd be lying if I said we weren't concerned about direct competition, but, we support all local business and hope that new talent in the area brings new customers for everyone," Chef Ernie said. "We were the new kids on the block this time last year, and we were embraced by

even those local businesses who we were in competition with.

"I have to be honest, there's a pretty good chance I'll be Buttery Baking House's best customer," Chef Ernie admitted. "With a last name like mine you can't keep me away from laminated French pastry. As far as Dunkin' goes... Corporate Overlords ... Fight The Power."



Beanuts coffee

I snagged a few quotes while I captured this delicious story. Beanuts sells cheap coffee, and they are proud to do so. Alexis Slattery who works nearby likes its taste and price.

"You can't beat \$1 a cup. It's the cheapest in this area and good," Slattery of Matoaca said. "It's their french fry seasoning that keeps me coming back. It's really good."

"Customers ask if they can buy our BeauBQ spice," KB LeBrecque said. "I wish we had time to make extra for them."



Mike Cassada heard about Beaunuts's awesomeness so he made his way from Midlothian to meet a friend for a cup of java and to get donuts to go.

"Their coffee is phenomenal, and you can't beat it for a buck," Cassada said.

I chatted with Markje Walker while he waited for his takeout order. He likes the Beau-ldy Lox with smoked salmon, tomato aioli and slaw on an Everything Beau Biscuit, but the hot dogs are his favorite.

Owners Ryan and Lauren Carnes of Atlantic Stair Crafters in Petersburg are Beaunuts regulars and appreciate the menu that changes slightly each week.

"We always get what's on special," Lauren Carnes said.



The LeBrecque duo keeps fans in the know at beaunutsdonuts.com and on Facebook and Instagram. KB's images of Chef Ernie's edible masterpieces make me want to teleport to Old Towne.

Beaunuts Buttermilk Donuts is located at 404 A N. Sycamore Street in Petersburg. It is open Wednesday - Monday from 7:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. and every second Friday during Old Towne's Friday for the Arts! from 6:30 p.m. - midnight.

The restaurateurs find owning and operating Beaunuts as well as their Beau Box food truck incredibly hard but rewarding.

"No one is in a bad mood on their way to buy donuts," Chef Ernie said. "It's nice seeing so many people daily who are excited about what we do."

Read this story at progress-index.com to view the gallery and watch video footage of me making donuts. Chef Ernie will also be sharing how he tweaked his Alabama granny's biscuit recipe to create the dough used for his Beaunuts.

Virginia icon Adams' Peanuts & Country Store turns 61: Dandoodles, Rat Cheese, friendship

'Every day it's someone new, new, new. We're blessed' - Lewis Adams



After passing by Adams' Peanuts & Country Store for 35 years, I finally stopped to check out the iconic destination on Route 460 between Wakefield and Waverly.

Upon entry, country hams smacked me in the face, beasts eye-balled me, and antiques and homemade crafts beckoned me. I was in hog heaven and didn't know where to begin.

The old-timey store reminded me of Oleson's Mercantile from "Little House on the Prairie." I expected Nellie to appear with her curls bouncin' up and down pissin' and moanin' about something.

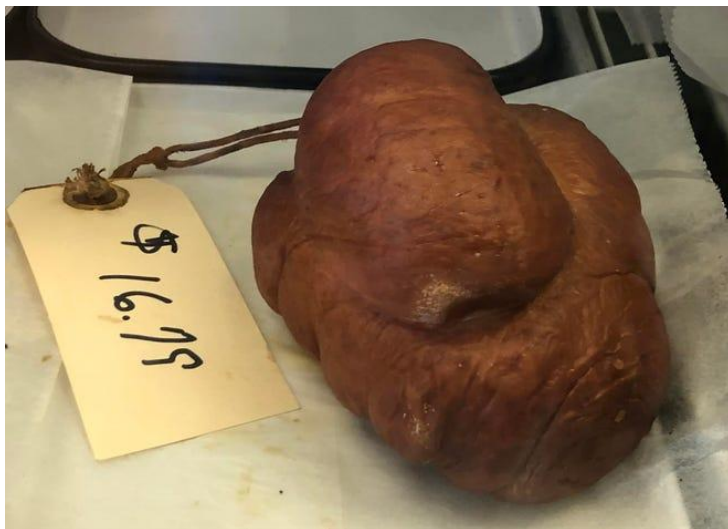


Anyone who knows me...knows I'm a talker. However, I met my match.

Adams' Peanuts & Country Store owner Lewis Adams is the fastest-talking individual I have ever met. He could easily moonlight as an auctioneer.

"When locals come in to purchase their ham, peanuts, chips, and cold soda, they share town news and reminisce about history in the area," Lewis Adams' wife Lynne Adams said.

Newbies, regulars, vacationers, and reporters who ask a lot of questions are on a first-name basis with the Adams couple.



Ever heard of dandoodles?

As I walked by the deli counter, I did a double take. An odd-looking lump about the size of a softball was next to

the smoked link sausage. A dandoodle is a stuffed and smoked sausage seasoned with spices.

"Dandoodles fly out of the store to the beat of sometimes twelve a day," Lynne said. "We encourage folks to call before they come if that is their primary purchase as we do sell out."

The dandoodles with a limited production are made by a local family business.



Hams

In January of 1961, the Adams began selling hams and peanuts.

Melissa Cornwell who has lived nearby in Ivor for over 40 years stopped by. "I finally made it in here to try your ham sandwich and chocolate-covered peanuts that I hear so

much about," Cornwell said. "Next time, I'll bring my boys with me."

"Every day it's someone new, new, new," Lewis stated. "We're blessed."



I asked Lynne what makes their ham sandwiches so special.

"They're all about the ham. We keep it simple with mayo or mustard, soft bread, an option of sharp cheese...The End," Lynne shared.

Whole cured country ham sales vary based on seasons, special events, holidays, and tourist travel. The Adams occasionally sell out, especially at Christmastime.



"We always encourage new customers not to procrastinate purchasing items," Lewis said. "Seasoned customers have learned their lesson."

Food and travel blogger Ella Dickinson of Old Towne Petersburg thinks Adams' Peanuts is fabulous.

"Delightful owners who made us delicious country ham, cheese and mayo sandwiches. Had to pick up some peanuts too, of course," Dickinson blogged after her first visit last year. "I love classic country stores, just like this one. This is going to be my new go-to stop when heading east. I'm just sorry it's taken me this long to figure that out."

"Best ham sammich anywhere," Oakland Baptist Church Senior Pastor Lee Woodcock of Carson posted on Facebook.



Peanuts

In a nutshell, this is how the iconic marvel began: Alcidees Adams began growing peanuts on his farm in 1928. Then, his son Calvin L. Adams founded Adams' Peanuts & Country Store in 1961, 61 years ago this January. Lewis, Calvin's son, began roasting peanuts with the family recipe in 1977.

Prepared the old-fashioned way, Adams' Peanuts are cooked and sold one mile from the site of the first commercially grown peanuts in Sussex County, Va.

The Adams sell a variety of peanut items: cocktail [salted/unsalted], butter-toasted, raw, honey-toasted, chocolate-dipped, roasted in shells [salted/unsalted] as well as peanut squares.



Cheese with many names

Lewis gave me a sample of the cheese that they sell custom-cut straight from a cheese wheel called Hoop Cheese, Rat Cheese, Cheddar Cheese, Old Cheese, and June Cheese. It was very sharp and delicious.

"Sure, you might be able to receive the same personal customer service at grocery stores, but you won't hear stories about our cheese shopping adventures," Lynne said.

Customers buy the special cheese to nibble on or to use in recipes such as mac and cheese, cheese and toast, cheese and crackers, grits and cheese, melted cheese sandwiches, and cheddar soup.



"Now, we have another lady in here whose family calls it Cookin' Cheese because that's what their grandma called it," Lewis said.

The top five best-selling items according to Lynne are peanuts, ham, bacon, hog jowls and jams.

Amanda Williams of Chester dropped by Adams' to purchase smoked link sausage. Williams, comfortable in her surroundings, stretched her arms and back while waiting for her order.

"She's a regular, stops by every three or four weeks," said Adams.



Seasonal items

The Christmas Candy for sale is produced by a Chesapeake family business. It transported me back to my Great Grandmother Mabel's. She served them in tiny dishes on her coffee and end tables.

New Crop Navy Beans arrive late in October and sell out before March. Since they are freshly picked and received by the Adams within weeks of picking, the beans do not need soaking.

"They're great in a Crock-pot," Lynne Adams shared.



Shopkeeper with a funny side

Walking through memory lane, I came across humorous items, funny signage, and comic strips that made me chuckle.

"My wife enjoys posting positive sayings, quotes, and comics in our store to make folks smile, ponder life," Lewis said.

Lynne's decoupage tile creation with sunflowers, a butterfly button, and the positive saying "Difficult roads often lead to beautiful destinations" caught my eye. I grabbed it and a York Peppermint Pattie to take home with me.



Lewis explained how the placement of the Peppermint Patties next to the Peanut Squares is a marketing technique that he learned in his 20s.

"A couple of old ladies came in here and said, 'You've got to have this and that together. They complement each other, one brings out the other,'" Lewis shared. "A lady came in the other day, pointed at them, and said, 'You all know what's going on.'"

Lynne's mom Betty is another crafter connected to the store. She makes flower arrangements, wreaths, and casserole covers.



Conversation starters

Everywhere I turned, I found myself asking Lewis to tell me the story behind an object. He doesn't mind a bit sharing his wealth of knowledge.

According to Lynne, antiques in the store originated from the late Calvin Adams and were sold as his hobby. Now, the items add a museum and nostalgic vibe to the store. Customers can often be heard commenting on their own antique collections.

Several patrons have voiced interest in the big church bell that Calvin Adams purchased at an auction sale in the mid-70s.

"How does one price such a piece of history," Lewis said.



Secret to success

Country stores are a dying breed, but the Adams' Peanuts & Country Store survives with its unique atmosphere, selection of country-food items, and location along a busy corridor.

"Lewis takes the time to get to know customers and this individual attention does not exist in most businesses, big or small," Lynne said. "Bonding and making a personal connection with people is key to returning customers."

"Simple chats can lead to life-long friendships," Lewis said.

"Because we have been in the same location for so many years, we have witnessed family cycles from engagements, marriages, pregnancies, children, grandchildren and sadly...deaths," Lynne added. "Customers are our extended family."

"No matter where we go shopping or exploring, we often hear 'Hey, Mr. Adams, where is my ham sandwich,'" Lynne said. "Pretty remarkable that even with masks, customers recognize Lewis and put forth the effort to talk to him."



Adams' Peanuts & Country Store is located at 9243 General Mahone Highway in Waverly. It is open Monday - Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. January - April and also on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. May - December. Visit adamspeanuts.com for more information.

"We ship hams, peanuts, candies, and more," Lewis said. "Just no glass containers like jams, pickles, beets, or honey."

Virginia tourist attraction: Butterflies LIVE! returns to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

The Social Butterfly flutters and shutters among hundreds of tropical butterflies: Captures magnificent images, exclusive Emergence Room video footage

This Mama Llama scored major brownie points with my son Forrest and daughter Jenavieve. My pride and joys gleefully accepted my invitation to spend an afternoon at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, one of Virginia's precious gems.

The popular Henrico attraction just outside of Richmond has over 50 acres of spectacular gardens to explore and admire. My favorite feature is the Conservatory, a fancy word for greenhouse, hothouse or glasshouse.

In 2019, USA Today voted Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden as the fourth “Best Botanical Garden” in the Nation out of 20 nominees. That same year, Better Homes & Garden

Magazine recognized it as one of "8 Most Instagram-Worthy Botanical Gardens in the U.S."

I livened our bonding moment up a bit by donning butterfly wings. Isn't it every mom's job to embarrass their offspring? Ha!

As I fluttered across the parking lot, a gentleman said, "Bonita mariposa." Jenna quickly translated, "Pretty butterfly."



Butterflies LIVE!

Butterflies and moths mesmerize me with their majestic elegance and beauty.

I went snap-happy in the M&T Bank Butterflies LIVE! exhibition housed in the Conservatory's North

Wing. It truly is magnificent! People of all ages loved to watch the colorful insects feed and flutter.

Visiting Butterflies LIVE! for the first time with his family, Buddy Small of Colonial Heights approached me and said, "Why am I not surprised to see The Progress-Index Social Butterfly in the butterfly exhibit."



According to Beth Rilee Monroe, Chief Marketing Officer, most of the 3,516 total Garden guests on April 16 and 17 visited Butterflies LIVE!'s opening weekend. The first butterfly exhibit featuring tropical species was in 2009 as part of the Garden's celebration of its 25th anniversary.

"We were able to bring the exhibit back in 2012, and it ran annually through 2019. During the height of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the exhibit was closed," Monroe said.

"Everyone is so excited to have the butterflies back this year."



Being the Social Butterfly that I am, I picked Mary Lincoln's brain about the impressive exhibit. The Exhibitions Coordinator happily shared her knowledge.

Many times, I had to step over a butterfly. It made me wonder how often they expire on the underside of a shoe.

"As we greet our guests, we tell them about the butterflies and remind them to please keep an eye out for butterflies on the floor," Lincoln said. "Being proactive in this way helps minimize incidences of butterflies being stepped on."

Butterflies LIVE! guests enter and exit in small numbers via a vestibule. It is mainly used to watch for winged escapees.



"The vestibule is important because most of our butterflies are non-native species, and we must ensure they do not escape into our local ecosystem," Lincoln said. Because the butterflies like to 'hitchhike' on items such as clothes and bags, we have to make sure we check guests before they leave. This can happen a handful of times each day."

As Grace Huntoon of Williamsburg waited in line to exit the exhibit, she stated, "Every time I step on a rock, I feel like I'm crunching a butterfly."

I observed a butterfly curator capture a "hitchhiker" in the vestibule. Then, he patiently waited for the wanderer to take flight from the net at its own pace.



Chesterfield County Public School teacher Cathy Kunkel of Midlothian could not depart Butterflies LIVE! until a butterfly finished resting on her back.

"Years ago we brought our Thelma Crenshaw Elementary first graders here," Kunkel said. "Every spring, we raise butterflies in our class. It's 'never' not amazing to them."

"It is really cool to see different butterfly species from around the world. I've witnessed interesting things while working with them," Lincoln said. "One time we had a butterfly emerge that had male markings on one side and female markings on the other. This is somewhat rare and is the result of a minor chromosomal anomaly. The technical term for it is bilateral gynandromorphy."



Ninety different species will be represented throughout the duration of the exhibit which runs through Oct. 10. Guests will more than likely see different varieties of butterflies with each visit.

The exhibit includes a butterfly nursery. Guests may see butterflies emerge from one of the many chrysalides inside the wooden display.

Years ago, I discovered a caterpillar dressed in a black, green, yellow and white-striped suit feasting on my bronze fennel. I placed the herb thief in an aquarium. It stopped eating, hung upside down from a twig, molted into a chrysalis, and weeks later emerged as a gorgeous Black Swallowtail.



Butterflies LIVE! also includes enormous Atlas moths [Attacus atlas], one of the largest moths in the world found in the forests of Asia. Butterfly Educator Nathan Kristofik pointed out how the markings on the upper corner of their wings resemble the head of a snake. Predators get confused, and they get to live another day.

As I exited the Conservatory, I noticed a man keeping watch over two strollers while seated on a butterfly-shaped bench.

"We brought our grandkids here for Easter to see the butterflies," Angel Gonzalez of Chester said.



Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

"It's been really fun. There's been a lot of flowers, plants and butterflies that I've never seen before," Mai-Londen Edwards of Mechanicsville said. "I've had three butterflies land on me so far."

Seven-year-old Charlotte Coillot while crouching down low to get a good look at a butterfly said. "I love seeing the butterflies. I like blue ones the best."

With my lens, I captured Jeffrey Coogle while he looked keenly upon a variety of butterflies in a release box aka net cage.

"I've been here numerous times, but this is my first visit to the butterfly exhibit. It's well done and worth the cost of admission," Coogle of Richmond said. "The butterfly on my daughter has been there for over five minutes."



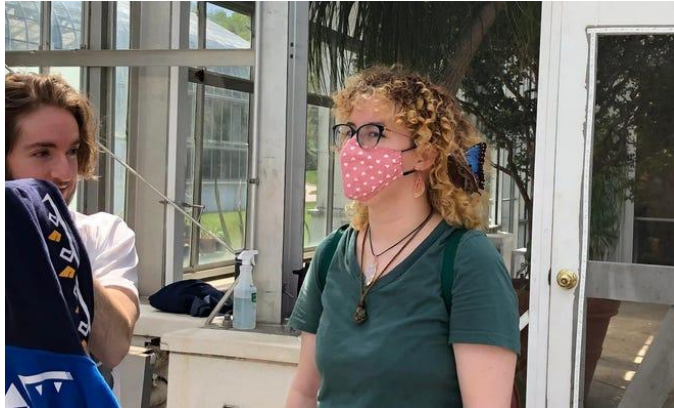
Experience the magic

Visit by Oct. 10 before the butterflies get rounded up to dazzle guests at the Butterfly Magic exhibit at Tucson Botanical Gardens in Arizona.

Conservatory exhibits are included in the regular daily admission: \$17 for adults, \$14 for seniors, \$8 for children, and under age three are free.

If tourists get hungry or thirsty, they can stop by the Garden Café located in the Visitor Center daily between 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Between May 1 and June 26, the Robins Tea House with a picturesque view of the West Island Garden is another option on Saturdays and Sundays between 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.

The must-see destination has a dozen themed gardens, a library, a café, and an enormous gift shop.



I'm not exaggerating; their Garden Shop is massive with a variety of merchandise to wear, eat, read, experience and plant.

My sweet Jenavieve Rose purchased me a butterfly charm in the Garden Shop. The card it came with contained the following poem by A.S. Waldrop:

A butterfly is so beautiful, graceful and elegant we see;
symbolizing life's quick changes there are parallels to you
and me.

It also symbolizes faith and embraces the journey along
the way; may you be inspired by the butterfly as you
go about your day.



Kristofik gave us an added thrill. It was tight, but the four of us squeezed into the closet-like Emergence Room. My mini-social butterflies asked great questions.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden is located at 1800 Lakeside Avenue in Henrico. It is open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and closed on Nov. 25 and Dec. 24-25. Visit lewisginter.org for more information.

— *Kristi K. Higgins aka The Social Butterfly columnist is the trending topics and food Q&A reporter at The Progress-Index. Have a news tip on local trends or businesses? Contact Kristi (she, her) at khiggins@progress-index.com, follow @KHiggins_PI on Twitter and @socialbutterflykristi on Instagram.*