

# Charcuterie shop opens in Bay Shore

Couple launches first Graze Craze franchise on LI

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While scrolling through his Instagram feed one day, Joe Rago was captivated by a photo of a charcuterie board containing an assortment of meats, fresh fruits and vegetables and cubes of cheese, all artfully placed on a wood serving platter. The caption read: "Join the Graze Craze!"

Rago, of Brightwaters, spotted the post by the charcuterie-focused company at an opportune time. He had just finished a seasonal job cooking at a Fire Island restaurant for more than two decades, and was ready to dive into another kind of restaurant scene.

"I was just looking for something different to do," said the 49-year-old chef, who has worked at restaurants nationwide. "I wanted to be involved with food, but I didn't want to be trapped in a kitchen."

That entrepreneurial spirit led Rago and his wife, Amy, to dig into the world of food ventures and eventually open a Graze Craze franchise in Bay Shore, marking the company's Long Island debut.

The eatery opened on Fourth Avenue on May 22.

The husband-wife team is betting that demand for visually striking, easy-to-order charcuterie boards is more than a social media trend. Graze Craze, which began franchising five years ago, now has more than 120 locations across five countries and 36 states, according to the company.

Graze Craze was founded in Oklahoma, with its first location opening there in 2020. The business model combines a physical storefront, where customers can pick up boards to go, with online ordering for catering and delivery. Boards

## WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Joe and Amy Rago are the husband-and-wife team** behind a new Graze Craze franchise in Bay Shore, marking the company's Long Island debut.
- **Graze Craze** has more than 120 locations across five countries and 36 states, according to the company.
- **Charcuterie has been around for decades** and continues to evolve, with its visually striking aesthetic and easily customizable structure as its main appeal, an industry expert said.

range from individual portions to platters that serve about 20 people, with options featuring cured meats, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, crackers, dips, desserts and specialty boards for vegetarian and keto customers.

As a concept, charcuterie has been around for decades and continues to evolve, offering an opportunity for businesses like Graze Craze, an industry expert said.

"The buzz has always been there," said Brook Herritt, a culinary arts instructor at Eastern Suffolk BOCES.

### About the craze

Grazing boards not only help satiate appetites at gatherings, but also serve as a tool for socializing, said Mandi Friedrich, a longtime wedding and event planner. Her company, Iconic Events by Mandi, is based in Bohemia.

Gathering around the boards "give people a chance to mingle," Friedrich said, and the aesthetically pleasing platters beg to be photographed, making them promotable through social media.

Charcuterie boards are an elevated "cheese and crackers" concept, said Herritt, who also



Joe and Amy Rago opened their Graze Craze charcuterie board franchise in Bay Shore on May 22.

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— Joe Rago, of Brightwaters, on Graze Craze charcuterie boards

has worked in television production on the Food Network. The platters can be customized for themed events or dietary needs, she said. The concept can be adapted easily to food and event trends, so Herritt predicts success for Graze Craze's business model.

"It's very time-consuming to do it yourself, to make it look beautiful," Herritt said. "So when you can just go pick it up, I think you've got so much potential to keep it evolving with the times. This concept can continue to grow with whatever's currently trending."

Graze Craze is "expanding at a good clip" by franchising, food industry analyst Donna Hood Crecca said in an email to Newsday. Crecca is a senior principal at Technomic, a restaurant industry analysis firm.

Graze Craze went from 39 locations in the United States at the end of 2023 to 90 nationwide by the end of 2025, accord-

ing to Technomic data.

The company is hoping to expand from 36 states to 40 by the end of the year, and has long-term goals to add more storefronts on Long Island, said marketing director Meagan Corey.

The initial franchising fee is \$49,500, and the estimated total investment ranges from \$175,000 to \$200,000, Corey said. She added that 80% of the Graze Craze consumer base is female, and the majority of the franchise owners are women.

So far this year, the company has opened 21 locations, with 45 more in development and on track to open by the end of 2026, Corey said.

There are several independently run charcuterie businesses across Long Island, such as Mill Road Cheese Shop in Westhampton Beach, Cheese & Spice Market in Wading River, Babylon Cheese Cellar and Village Cheese Shoppe in Southampton. Nassau shops in-

clude Let It Brie in Rockville Centre and The Cheese Store in Cedarhurst.

### Growing their business

The Bay Shore franchise owners are finding new avenues for their business: The Ragos said they selected their location for its up-and-coming Main Street, and proximity to Fire Island. The storefront is about a half mile from the ferry, and they've already shipped several boards there for restaurant owners hosting events, Joe Rago added.

It was the couple's combined skillset that led them here: Amy Rago, 45, worked as a server and bartender while earning her master's degree in speech pathology. "I always kind of had a feeling we would try to do something on our own," she said.

The Ragos have been cooking up plenty of ideas for the community, such as charcuterie-making classes and vegan- and child-friendly options.

For the couple, the target audience is anyone hosting an event, big or small, Joe Rago said. As a franchise owner, he's appreciating the change of scene but still enjoys assembling boards in the kitchen.

"Handing it to somebody and seeing the look on their face, that's a rewarding thing," he said.