

Coffee crusade: Toledo area's indie shops take on the big chains

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A pour over coffee, or drip coffee, brews inside of SIP COFFEE in Toledo on Sept. 16.

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Independent Toledo-area coffee shops are fighting back against Big Coffee.

Chains like Starbucks and Scooter's may have opened people's minds to the idea that a cup of joe can be a delightful taste experience instead of just a jolt of caffeine, but the independents have made people aware that there's an alternative to grab-and-go java.

The resulting growth of local coffeehouses has produced an eclectic array of caffeinated hang-out spots.

"There's more of an experience there in independent coffee shops," said Vince Chapey, the president of Matthews, a Nashville-based real estate investment firm that specializes in commercial spaces. "The individual serving the drinks is a little more lively — and you're more likely to form a relationship with the barista."

Individually, Toledo's independent coffee shops aren't going to make the tiniest dent in the coffee sales of chains like Starbucks, Tim Horton's or Dunkin'. But collectively, they may be reshaping the coffeehouse experience by providing a more homey, personal touch that invites customers to linger.

A Friends-inspired coffeehouse in a mall

Franklin Perk has the indie coffeehouse aesthetic down. Warm lighting. Wood-grained floors. A library of books and games. A Wi-Fi password posted prominently. A funky orange leather couch atop an oriental rug. Some comfy maroon armchairs. A mural that features local landmarks and a representation of espresso being poured.

Customers ranging from toddlers to the middle-aged come in, either to sit and stay or to get a coffee to go.

The only thing that doesn't fit is the view. The shop's front door and windows open onto a corridor of Franklin Park Mall.

Kris and Kayla Gilbert opened the place in February, 2024.

"This is my first restaurant," Mr. Gilbert said. "I had a mobile cafe before and made a lot of contacts. Then we decided to upgrade to a full cafe. At the time, I heard there was a lot of coffee in Toledo — but there was zero in the mall."

The shop's and decor owe something to *Friends*, a television sitcom that ran from 1994 to 2004 and featured a coffee shop called Central Perk — and an orange couch.

"We had an opportunity to build what was missing," Mr. Gilbert said, adding that he wanted to create a place that was something more than a place to pick up a quick cup of java and leave.

Mr. Gilbert said the shop is doing better than expected and continues to grow.

"Our product is fresher than the chains" Mr. Gilbert said. "Our coffee is brewed days after its roasted — not months."

Lilybeth Wallerman and Williamson Niceman, seniors at the University of Toledo, were studying there one recent day.

Ms. Wallerman said she lives right above a coffeeshop she finds a little expensive.

"I come here for something different," she said. "They have a good music playlist. And the coffee here is really good."

Mr. Niceman said he dislikes studying in his room because that's where he relaxes.

"Finding a new environment is the best thing for me," he said.

A venerable organization's shop in Maumee

For 20 years, Sunshine Communities has operated Georgette's Grounds & Gifts on Conant Street.

"A lot of people tell me it feels just like *Cheers*," said Tiffany Becker, a program services manager for the organization, referring to another old television show that aired from 1982 to 1993. "It's comforting. It's warm. The staff tries our hardest to remember everyone who comes in here."

The shop is part of the 75-year-old Sunshine organization, whose mission is to create community among people with developmental disabilities. Some of the people the organization assists are employed at the nearby coffee packing facility.

On Wednesday morning, as Miles Davis' version of "My Funny Valentine" purred in the background, Theresa Killian sat at her regular table. Ms. Killian has lost track of how old she is, but she still walks to the shop almost every day and seems delighted to be there.

When she comes in, Melissa Grimes, one of the job coaches with the Sunshine organization, immediately starts making her regular order.

"I'm glad this place is here," Ms. Killian said. "I don't have a car, so I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have this. There's no other place like this for me."

Another regular, Sierra Giesige, used to work at Starbucks. The comparison for her was easy.

"This place feels more like a family," she said, speaking of Georgette's. "Starbucks was more like a business. One day I walked in here and the staff was singing 'Happy Birthday' to one of their coworkers. I almost cried. That doesn't happen at Starbucks."

There's a sizeable back room at Georgette's where the Maumee Rotary Club meets regularly.

"It's really hard to find free meeting space," said Paula Birney, president of the Maumee club. "And we like to support our local community."

On other days, a group that calls itself the ex-cons — former Conrail employees — gets together there.

A vibrant coffee shop near Old Orchard

Courtney Cousino doesn't do the mellow coffeehouse scene. And she never sits down — at least not for a conversation with a reporter about her West Toledo coffee shop, Sip.

"I keep it lively and loud," she said proudly.

As Sip's owner, she also takes pride in running a place where business is done.

"People are always saying to me, 'Oh, you're so close to UT, you must get a lot of college kids in here.' Look around! We don't have many college kids here. We're more of a business hub. And every day, people thank me for what we do here."

Keith Howell, a partner at Howell Properties, a real estate investment firm, was one of the businesspeople at work at Sip on Wednesday.

"I come here frequently," he said. "I enjoy the camaraderie and the activity. I usually get a cold brew. I've been to other places, but this place is so vibrant. And you never know who you're going to run into here."

As if on cue, Ms. Cousino walked up to his table, called Mr. Howell by name and declined to sit down.

“There’s four things I pride my business on,” she said. “Customer service, quality of product, cleanliness, and the vibe.”

She is keenly aware of the competition she faces.

“Starbucks is right there,” she said, gesturing toward Westgate. “Dunkin’ is around the corner. If we don’t capture the customer with a smile and a welcome, we could lose them.”

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