

COLLABORATION, COFFEE AND COMMUNITY

Perk keeps it hyperlocal BY STACEY M. HOLLIS

OWNER AARON CHESTER AND BARISTA OKON UDOSENATA

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

If you're looking for a coffee shop that's intricately woven into the local community, check out Perk Coffee and Espresso on Willamette Street. "Everything that we have in our shop that I can control is all local, usually from the smallest businesses I can find," says owner Aaron Chester, who started the shop just over a year ago.

After working at different coffee shops around Eugene, including managing Sweet Life Patisserie, Chester was ready to start his own. "I like the community that we build," he says. And that community includes the network of small businesses he works with that take advantage of these nearby resources and use them to their potential, he says. "It's a lot of work," Chester says, "but I think that we have an availability of food and ingredients used that is amazing in this area of the country."

And they work with some really great people, Chester says, like local wood-roasted coffee proprietor Eric Pierce at Caffé Pacori. "Eric's out there splitting wood, doing

everything in the mornings," Chester says. "It's kind of neat that there's someone here in town who does that."

Perk's other local partners include Knead Freaks Bakery, Chains and Grains (makers of pretzels and bread), Humble Bagel, LMF Tea Traders and Blue Lotus Chai. Chester's standing order with Karen Nunley at Holy Donuts is "whatever she feels like making," and he's rewarded with specialty peach-raspberry and berry-plum pies.

Chester and crew make Perk's own chocolate with a nondairy base, and they make most of the syrups, like lavender, rosemary, caramelized sugar and butter-based caramel. Rosemary syrup in an iced coffee adds a savory twist, and the coconut milk iced coffee is light and refreshing. But Chester has another suggestion: "When I go in and order a drink, I just say, 'Make me what you want to make me today.'" He says his baristas are all top-notch right now, and they'll know what's pulling best that day.

Chester focuses on house-made and local sourcing because he knows the struggles smaller businesses face.

"They are forced to try harder," he says. "The bigger names can automatically can get away with whatever they want, but the little person has to show up and really put the effort in and go that that extra step." It's the extra step from these small businesses that is meaningful to him: "It shows in the quality and consistency and the attention to detail," he says.

Chester names Zachariah Swan from Eugene Handbuilt, a local baked goods seller, as an example. He will bring in a sample of something new he's found, a product that might be of better quality, Chester says, so everyone can taste and decide whether it's worth the expense. "He really goes the extra mile, and it's great to see."

And not only are Perk's products thanks to local collaboration, the furniture in the quirky little shop is too. "Everything made in here was made with recycled materials," Chester says. "We don't buy new equipment." Much of interior was built using materials from BRING recycling. ■

Perk is located at 1351 Willamette St., 636-3255.

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