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CAFFEINE CONNECTION

Hermiston coffee shops an integral part of morning routine

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Baristas might not put out fires or deliver babies, but for anyone who needs that morning cup of coffee in order to function, dispensing caffeine-infused beverages can feel like an essential service.

“I open at quarter to five, and people who work the five o’clock shift are pretty much right in line,” Marla Ceisel said.

Ceisel is the owner of Obie’s Express, one of several coffee options along Highway 395 in Hermiston. She has been in business for 25 years, and like everyone interviewed about coffee in Hermiston, she said customer service is highly important in an industry that so many people look to in order to start out their day on the right foot.

Often, people’s coffee habits amount to a quick exchange at the drive-through window, but Ceisel said she also has many customers who choose Obie’s for the food or the atmosphere. She has several regulars who work from home but use Obie’s for sit-downs with clients or a change of scenery.

“Mornings are by definition our busy time, but we do pretty good business all day,” she said.

Some coffee shops, like Sorbenots, are strictly drive-through operations and tout their quick customer service. Ashley Lyons, who manages the Hermiston location, said their fast-moving line is helped by “lots and lots” of regulars who order the same thing every day, meaning the staff can already have their drink waiting for them by the time they pull up to the head of the line.

Lyons said they try to add extra customer service touches like keeping dog treats around for the canines accompanying their owner on a morning coffee run.

“Anyone can go anywhere and get a cup of coffee, but we greet them and get them in a good mood and get them pumped up for the day,” she said.

Sorbenots may sound like a fancy Italian surname, but it’s actually “Stone Bros” spelled backward. Owner Jason Stone said he and his brother Phil started out under the name Cappacino Cowboy in Baker City in 1995 but wanted to change the name to something more unique as they expanded to other Eastern Oregon locations. They opened in Hermiston in 2002, across Highway 395 from Payless Shoes.

“We really lucked out in Hermiston,” he said. “I don’t think we could find a better spot.”

He said the thing that has really changed in the coffee business over the years is that people have learned more about coffee and the different ways it can be served.

“At first we had to educate people on what espresso drinks are, but they quickly realized how much more flavor you can get out of espresso,” he said.

Hermiston’s coffee shops all have their fans. An unscientific Facebook poll drew 192 responses over three days, and while Heidi’s Coffee Cottage and Dutch Brothers were the favorites with more than 40 positive comments each, all of the shops had a sizable loyal



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Tonee Harris serves a customer a coffee drink in the drive-through recently at Obie’s Express in Hermiston.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Scott Cimmiyotti reads a newspaper on a couch at Obie’s Express coffee shop recently in Hermiston.

following.

Java Junkies, which is located in Umatilla along Highway 730, wasn’t technically in the running since it’s outside of Hermiston, but that didn’t stop two dozen people from writing in that it was their favorite place to get coffee.

Dauna Griggs, who runs the shop with her mother Vickie Borden, said their most popular coffee drink is the Hannah, named after the former employee who created it when she was in high school several years ago. It features white chocolate, caramel, English toffee and toasted marshmallow.

Griggs said besides the good coffee and food, people seem to enjoy using Java Junkies as a hangout with its free Wifi and upbeat vibe.

“We play Christian music and just try to keep it really positive in here,”

she said.

The pair is opening a drive-through location in Irrigon starting in April.

Lots of people talked about wanting to support a locally owned business, but Karen Haugeberg pointed out that one of the advantages of going to a national chain like Starbucks is she can get the exact same drink no matter what city she’s in.

“I like the consistency,” she said.

Starbucks may not be locally owned, but Haugeberg said the baristas are still locals and they still provide great customer service. On days she’s feeling like something new she can describe a drink and they’ll whip it up even though it’s not on the menu, then tell her what to ask for if she ever wants to order the same thing again. They also know her regular order and always inquire after her two-year-old twins.

“In the drive-through I’ll just say

‘Hi it’s Karen’ and they’ll say ‘Alright, we’ve got you,’” she said.

Katie Simmons said the same level of customer recognition happens at Heidi’s Coffee Cottage, where she goes “pretty much daily” with her husband on his lunch break.

“I just love going there,” she said.

“They know my regular order. We went on vacation for two and a half weeks and when we got back into town they were like, ‘Where have you been? We missed you.’”

Taija Petersen is a Heidi’s fan too. She said out of all the coffee options in town she’s found they have the most consistent quality of drink and customer service.

“They’re the best,” she said. “I’ve been going there for nine years now and I will not stop.”

For Cheryl Vermilion, it’s all about Dutch Brothers. She usually gets the Cocomo or a peppermint coffee from them on her way to work.

“The people that work there are extremely friendly and always ask how you are doing, and if it is the weekend they ask if you have any plans for the weekend,” she said.

She said the days she makes coffee at home instead just aren’t the same.

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Coffee of choice

We asked our Facebook audience which of Hermiston’s coffee options they preferred. Here’s how they voted:

Heidi’s Coffee	45
Dutch Brothers	42
Sorbenots	23
Obie’s Express	21
Starbucks	19
Java Junkies	18

Also receiving votes, or mentioned with other shops: 395 Quickstop, Java Dogs, Peach Tree Coffee (Umatilla), Lucky Jam Barn (Stanfield).