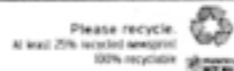


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Community

Battling the giant: local coffee shop serves it up

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LITTLE FALLS – In the future, all restaurants will be Taco Bell. At least, that's the rendering of planet Earth in "Demolition Man," the action-packed fantasy movie from 1993.

Perhaps, all department stores will be Target and all gyms will be Bally Total Fitness. It is almost certain that all coffee shops will be Starbucks.

Or will they? Starbucks opened 2,571 new stores internationally in the 2007 fiscal year, and it is still growing. One recent addition is in the West Belt Plaza on Route 23 in Wayne. Unlucky for Starbucks, there is some local competition from The Fine Grind, an independent coffee shop at 480 Main St. in Little Falls. Perhaps you've seen their new billboard, right across the street from the new Starbucks? It proclaims: "We may not be big, but we're not bitter."

At this 650-square-foot alternative hangout, owners Rhonda and Jon Mallek serve up a variety of special coffee brews for the young and old.

Their youngest patron, Kyle, is about 4 years old and drinks a small cup of decaffeinated coffee

cut with a lot of milk. "He won't drink coffee at Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks," said Rhonda. "He's says it tastes like dirt." When asked how old this loyal customer is Jon said with a chuckle, "He's somewhere between 4 and 30."

Rhonda and Jon met in 1999 on Match.com. They discovered that they each love to uncover and

sample independent coffee businesses, as opposed to frequenting the Starbucks chain.

"We love coffee shops," Rhonda exclaimed.

"We always pull over and go to independent coffee shops to see what they're serving and how they dec-

orate."

The Malleks were married three and a half years ago and then, a year later, they put their experience and collective knowledge to good use when they opened The Fine Grind. Jon is a coffee connoisseur who likes his coffee straight with no milk or frills. Rhonda, on the other hand, loves to experiment with trendy and diverse flavors many of which they've packaged into their multi-page menu. This coffee shop offers more than just your traditional coffee and espresso beverages, although they do

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Rhonda Mallek
Fine Grind co-owner

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STAFF PHOTOS/DEMITRIUS BALEVSKI



Rhonda and Jon Mallek, above, serve up a variety of special coffee brews for the young and old at the Fine Grind coffee shop at 480 Main St., Little Falls. Business is good despite the opening of a new Starbucks around the corner in front of Willowbrook Mall. At left, server Michelle Stryker whips up a Fro-Ho specialty drink.

FINE GRIND

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offer those too for the purists like Jon. Also on the menu are soups and sandwiches, all prepared by local companies and grilled to order in house.

"People don't go to the mall or Starbucks to celebrate," Rhonda said. With tearful eyes, she told the story of a 16-year-old patron who drove to the shop first thing after receiving her driver's license. "It's much more than coffee here," said Jon. "It's 'Cheers' without the alcohol."

The Malleks know their customers well. They know that one woman's mother is suffering from cancer. They know about their patron's jobs, their children and their pets. They know more than faces. They know names and life stories. Some customers come to the shop on dates, some come to read or play board games, and some come for special beverages the employees cater to the customers' individual needs.

"I'm a hands-on business person," Rhonda said. "I work eight days a week."

Even with Starbucks open practically next door, Rhonda says she isn't worried. To help encourage the stability and development of local small businesses, she and several other area business owners have formed the 07424 Network for Business, a coalition that provides members with referrals and opportunities for open discussion.

"Starbucks is synonymous with coffee," she said. "I'm trying to remind people that their buying decisions shape the community. If people want us to exist, they have to support us."

Jon says his goal is to make Main Street like Church Street in Montclair, a bustling center for small business and diversity. Rhonda said she doesn't want to see another strip mall in the area. The Malleks aren't trying to stop Starbucks from growing, or even to stop locals from buying the Starbucks product, but they do mean to offer another choice for area residents.

"It's a philosophy for me, not just a business," said Rhonda. "Coffee is a culture," she added.

Rhonda and Jon both enjoy the experience of spending time in coffee shops that reflect the communities they thrive in. The Malleks want The Fine Grind to be "the heart of the town." With that in mind, they sponsor a local soccer team and helped the local Alliance for a Better Community in its first ever New Jersey Idol Search (Jon is a judge). They also donate to area tricky tray fundraisers.

Continuing Starbucks expansion ensures that local coffee-drinkers will have easy access to coffee and espresso beverages. The Fine Grind, with its single location and the possibility of one or two more in the coming years, offers coffee, espresso and coffee shop culture. With local musicians performing live, a community bulletin board with town news and coffee trivia, and a club card program offering one free beverage for every 10 you buy, the Fine Grind coffee shop offers Little Falls a warm and inviting alternative to Starbucks.

For more information, visit their web site at www.thefinegrindcoffeebar.com.

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