



River Rock Coffee located in St. Peter. Photo from Tripadvisor.

TEA, *Anyone?* (Or Coffee, Perhaps)

By CARLIENNE FRISCH

A group of long-time friends gather over tea and scones, a family treats their children to lunch, a student takes a coffee break from studying online. Regular tea house or coffee shop customers usually are on a first-name basis with the owner of the business, who often is a female entrepreneur.

Heidi Wyn of Curiosi-Tea House in Mankato, the three women who own River Rock Coffee in St. Peter, and Patty Peterson, who opened Patty's Place in New

Prague 23 years ago, are typical of these women business owners. But all of them have a different story.

Wyn offers more than 200 teas at the Curiosi-Tea House. She has chosen nine vendors from around the world for their environmental and social sustainability. "I'm into experience. I offer samples of several teas and explain their background and flavor," Wyn said. "I love the variety, and that each tea is its own experience. After teaching every grade from kindergarten to college, I now teach tea." She even has a program that she offers to groups, Tea 101—the history and etiquette of teas and teapots.

A Mankato native, Wyn, whose caffeine sensitivity prevented her from drinking coffee during long meetings, credits a bottle of white tea with creating her interest. "I wondered why I'd never heard of white tea. So I went to tea shops (in the Twin Cities) and experienced as a customer what I now offer at Curiosi-Tea



Curiosi-Tea House located in Mankato. Photo from Facebook.

House,” she said.

Wyn opened the Curiosi-Tea House in September 2014. She partnered with other local businesses to add scones, cookies, other baked items, sandwiches, salads and puddings. “All foods are vegan or vegetarian, but cream and milk are available, as is tea to take out. We also have teapots, infusers, anything to do with tea,” she said.

The Curiosi-Tea House hosts a variety of gatherings, including book clubs, painting parties, Bible studies, open mic evenings, tarot readings, Red Hatters, bridal and baby showers, and happy hour tea tastings. Wyn provides tea for events such as art show receptions and church gatherings. In addition to selling bulk tea on site, she is considering marketing it online.

Like Wyn, the three women who own River Rock Coffee, do not bring a formal business education to their enterprise, having majored in literature, art history and chemistry. But as university students in California, Tamika Bertram and Katie Aho both learned about organic and specialty coffees and locally-grown organic food.

When Bertram relocated to St. Peter 16 years ago, she realized the area lacked a “community place” that she had seen in other cities. “I wanted to make a special place for St. Peter, a space for joy to inhabit. We have the opportunity to present delicious food - organic, locally produced food - alongside ethically sourced, specialty coffees, in a nourishing environment,” she said.

“We support the standard of fair trade, buying coffee from local cooperatives in each country, from small growers in specific countries near the Equator—Guatemala, Ethiopia, Mexico,” Bertram said. “We get farm products, all organic, from suppliers in South Central Minnesota, including whole wheat flour and other grains, blueberries and honey. We also have gluten-free options.”

Katie Aho and Helena Shanks began their relationship with River Rock Coffee as employees. Last year, they bought into the business. Aho, who handles community relations and staff de-

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Patty's Place located in New Prague.

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velopment, said, "The thing that draws me to be a business owner and be part of the community is the dynamic people I get to work with every day - the challenges of working and growing this together."

Shanks, cafe coordinator and manager in charge of product ordering and scheduling 10 employees, said, "I came in as a barista and continued to feel room for growth. I want every employee to feel that opportunity and the joy in coming to work every day."

Bertram is still the visionary, or as Aho said, "our brand magic."

When then 21-year-old Patty Peterson opened Patty's Place in 1995, she had a degree in baking from the Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis. She also had been decorating cakes with her mother and sister since childhood.

"I was baking in a coffee shop in another town and realized I liked doing both coffee and baking," Peterson said. When a building opened in her home town that she thought would be perfect for a coffee shop, she got help from a local banker and her family.

In addition to various coffees, which are also sold in bulk, Patty's Place offers a variety of pastries, including gluten free, as well as Czech kolacky. (Kolacky is plural of kolacek, which is a small kolac.) Soups, sandwiches and ice cream round out the menu. The specialty, however, is the demand for cakes.

"I'm just crazy-busy at the end of spring, with graduations, and for every holiday," Peterson said. "People get excited about holidays and treats themselves."

Whether it's with tea, specialty coffees or decorated cakes, these five women have made a success of serving the palates of their communities.

Carlienne Frisch, who writes from Mankato, enjoys freelance editing and working with non-profits.



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