

Caffeine high: Cafes continue pouring into Northwest Arkansas economy

Fayetteville has the most cafes

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by Lydia Fletcher

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Stella Rodda of Springdale grinds coffee beans at Cafe Con Chisme Saturday Feb. 17, 2024 in Springdale. Rodda is a barista and the training manager for the coffee shop, located at 317 W Emma Ave. Visit nwaonline.com/photo for today's photo gallery. (NWA Democrat-Gazette/J.T. Wampler)

Northwest Arkansas' coffee economy grows strong as shops open throughout the region.

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Fayetteville is home to almost 40 coffee shops, according to the city's business permits, with more coming to the region this year.

Competition seems to encourage rather than discourage. Owners cite the many differences unique to each shop from French to Mexican flavors, tasting classes and cozy seating to drive-thru only. The trend of more coffee shops at more locations won't end soon, industry experts say, especially in a college town like Fayetteville.

The Meteor Cafe is set to open this spring at South Yard in Fayetteville and recently opened shops include Dodo Coffee Co. on West Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Word Coffee on North College Avenue.

Word Coffee's founder, Giovanni Roberts, said he was aware of how many shops were in the region but wanted to bring Louisiana flavors and more specialty coffee options.

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Roberts said he and his wife moved to Fayetteville in October 2022 with plans to open a coffee shop after working in the industry over 10 years. He said the shop focuses on providing living wage for its employees and a space for community instead of competition with the local scene. The shop doesn't roast its own beans, Roberts said, meaning it buys beans already roasted from both local and national suppliers. Roberts said the shop only has guest roasters, as it is focused on highlighting global specialty roasters.

The store hosts tasting classes, something Roberts said he is passionate about, as he wants high-quality coffee experiences to be accessible to everyone.

Bringing his Louisiana roots to Fayetteville was a goal as well. The shop had Mardi Gras exclusive drinks and offers coffee with chicory, a New Orleans staple with French influences.

The shop opened last fall and is less than a mile from two other coffee shops.

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Roberts said he talked with other shops in town before opening Word, including Pink House Alchemy, which is only one block away from his location. Pink House Alchemy offers coffee, cocktail kits and specialty syrups sold nationally, according to its website.

He said he hopes the community sees his shop as a positive, since it took over an abandoned building space.

"There's some benefits to having a lot of shops in town," Roberts said. "I don't have to teach anyone what specialty coffee looks like, because it's already here. When somebody comes into our shop, they're not immediately thrown off."

HOW BUZZED ARE WE?

Almost 75% of American adults drink coffee daily, according to a 2024 study by Drive Research. The New York-based research company's 2021 study shows similar data, as 2021 and 2024 only had a 1% difference. Coffee is the most popular beverage other than tap water, according to the survey.

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Emily Rodgers, marketing manager for Drive Research, said people's obsession with coffee often comes from two sources: a love for the taste, or a desire for the energy boost. She said the habit and routine of making or grabbing a cup of coffee is an important factor as well.

Most coffee drinkers have only one or two cups per day, while 40% have three or more. This trend isn't slowing down, as only 18% of consumers reported they will decrease their caffeine consumption in the next year, according to the same study.

Rodgers said cafes often study markets before opening locations and try to find the demographic that fits them best. According to the study, almost 35% of Gen-Z respondents said they buy coffee outside the home a few times a week, and over 9% said they buy it outside the home every day. This makes college towns like Fayetteville a popular location for cafes looking to attract regular customers.

While Fayetteville has the most cafes in the region, Bentonville gained four new coffee shops from 2020 to 2023. The city has 19, according to Visit Bentonville.

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Two of these newly opened cafes are Airship Coffee. The company's founder, Mark Bray, said the roaster began operating in 2008 but opened its first cafe in 2018.

Bray said his business did things backward, as most start as cafes, then roast their own beans to increase profit margins.

He began studying coffee while pursuing his master's degree in horticulture at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and said he was inspired to help remote farmers in Honduras bring their product to the U.S.

His first concept was an importing company, he said, but the idea changed once he began learning to roast coffee. Bray said he began roasting beans in an old popcorn maker in his garage and selling them during evenings and weekends. The business soon expanded, and Bray left his horticulture background to open the Airship Roastery during the 2008 recession.

"It was comforting to me at the time that coffee had this history of being recession-proof," Bray said about his decision's timing. "It was sort of this affordable luxury that people were going to spend money on even when they were broke."

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His theory was correct for his business, as sales continued to grow. He provided coffee for restaurants throughout the region, but said his mission to support remotely located coffee farmers took a backseat. Ten years after the roastery's founding, the first Airship Cafe opened. Since then, Bray has opened three more locations in Bentonville, each with a unique purpose and design.

Airship at Coler Mountain requires people to reconnect with nature, as it is accessible only by walking and biking trails. Airship at The Ledger, however, is right in downtown Bentonville and often caters to those using the co-working space.

The company opened four locations in four years in Bentonville, but is scaling back from expansion to focus on unique guest experiences, Bray said.

STRANGE, STRONG BREW

With 93% of American adults drinking coffee at least once a week, shops are opening to provide unique options and keep up with the demand.

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Springdale is home to one of the latest after Cafe Con Chisme opened Feb. 17. The shop focuses on Latin American inspired coffees, such as cafe de olla, which is flavored with anise and orange. The business also serves other traditional drinks, such as horchata and agua frescas.

Co-owner Juan Roman-Dove said he was inspired to open the cafe in October after seeing similar concepts in larger cities. It's one of the first Hispanic-focused coffee shops in Northwest Arkansas.

Tonya Hernandez waited in line opening day and said she was happy to see traditional drinks on the menu.

"There's been something missing here, and I think this fills the gap," Hernandez said. "It's different flavors, different things I think that Hispanic families are going to lean towards. We want what we know."

WHAT'S IN YOUR CUP?

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Anna Packwood, a barista and student at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, said she often notices a split among coffee drinkers depending on age.

She currently works at the Arsaga's inside the Law Library at the university but said she began working as a barista for Locals Coffee in 2021. Cary and Cindy Arsaga opened the first location in 1992, making it one of the region's oldest shops still operating.

The family-owned company has multiple locations throughout Fayetteville, something essential to the business, Operations Manager Jason Arsaga said.

"Early on Cary and Cindy thought it was really important to be literally embedded in the fabric of Fayetteville," Arsaga said. "They've done that for so long, places will reach out about us being in their space."

The cafes are only in Fayetteville, with three free-standing locations, as well as two on the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus and one in the Fayetteville Public Library.

Arsaga said no two locations have the exact same menu, which provides customers a unique experience depending on which shop they visit.

Packwood began working for Arsaga's Law Library location and said she notices the crowd is mostly law professors, students and some regulars who enjoy that cafe's menu.

"I think Northwest Arkansas is a very interesting demographic with coffee," Packwood said.

"Millennials and up really care about specialty coffee and getting that really personal experience mainly with places like Onyx and Arsaga's. But there's the college and younger demographic, where people are mainly more focused on convenience."

Convenience coffee chains include, Starbucks, Dunkin' and Rogers-founded brand, 7Brew.

According to its website, 7Brew began in Rogers in 2017 and has opened 194 locations throughout the country since.

The shop's large menu allows for intricately customized drinks, even those without coffee. The shop offers a variety of teas and energy drinks alongside its coffee menu and has 13 stores in Northwest Arkansas, according to its website.

Packwood said she has worked in both convenience-focused and specialty-focused shops, and her on-campus job showed her some of the divides and trends.

She said college-aged customers usually buy an iced drink with alternative milk, while older customers usually opt for drip coffee, espressos or less sweet drinks. Packwood, a Fayetteville

native, said while she has seen the coffee scene grow, she thinks the region is staying on par with other cities.

"I don't think that's going to take away from the established trust a lot of these shops already have," Packwood said about new shops opening. "But that doesn't mean newcomers -- or whoever -- to Northwest Arkansas might try out a new shop that popped up."



Daniel Bereznicki/ Westside Eagle Observer Wings Coffee Co. serves a variety of coffee drinks with its own premium house coffee blend.



Carla Vargas of Springdale gets her first taste of coffee from Cafe Con Chisme Saturday Feb. 17, 2024 in Springdale. The coffee shop, located at 317 W Emma Ave. celebrated their grand opening on the 17th to enthusiastic customers. Visit nwaonline.com/photo for today's photo gallery. (NWA Democrat-Gazette/J.T. Wampler)



Carla Vargas gives her son Jeremiah Vargas, 8, a taste of a coffee drink from Cafe Con Chisme Saturday Feb. 17, 2024 in Springdale. Visit nwaonline.com/photo for today's photo gallery. (NWA Democrat-Gazette/J.T. Wampler)



Beverages are ready to be served Saturday Feb. 17, 2024 in Springdale. The coffee shop, located at 317 W Emma Ave. celebrated their grand opening on the 17th to enthusiastic customers. Visit nwaonline.com/photo for today's photo gallery. (NWA Democrat-Gazette/J.T. Wampler)



A crowd lines up to purchase coffee from Cafe Con Chisme Saturday Feb. 17, 2024 in Springdale. The coffee shop, located at 317 W Emma Ave. celebrated their grand opening on the 17th to enthusiastic customers. Visit nwaonline.com/photo for today's photo gallery. (NWA Democrat-Gazette/J.T. Wampler)

Bentonville Coffee Sales by Year

Coffee sales in Bentonville grew over 32% from 2021 to 2023.

2021: \$112,768.43

2022: \$134,742.32

2023: \$149,143.79

Source: Visit Bentonville