



Council President Pro Tem
Barbara Bry
Council District 1



Dear Neighbors,

Small businesses are the heart and the social glue of the communities they serve. That's especially true of coffee houses, where people have gathered to read, talk and improve their worlds for years.

San Diegans are ardent java drinkers, and that's fortunate for our many amazing coffee establishments.

In this week's small business newsletter, we check in with Bird Rock Coffee Roasters and Pinpoint Café to see how the pandemic has shaped the way that they do business.

Barbara Bry

Council President Pro Tem

If you own a D1 small business and have a pandemic story you would like to share with the community, please e-mail BarbaraBry@sanidiego.gov.

For local coffeehouse chain, hill of beans amounts to survival

Name: Bird Rock Coffee Roasters

Location: 5627 La Jolla Blvd., Bird Rock

Phone: (760) 269-8609

Website: www.birdrockcoffee.com

Hours: 6:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 6:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday through Sunday

Location: 2212 Carmel Valley Road, Carmel Valley

Phone: (760) 269-8799

Website: www.birdrockcoffee.com

Hours: 7 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 7 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday through Sunday

Co-owners: Jeff Taylor and Fred Polzin

It's difficult for Bird Rock Coffee Roasters co-owner Jeff Taylor to talk about the pandemic, which shuttered his San Diego organic and fair trade coffee chain from March 16 until the second week of May.

"Shutting down your business to zero feels a little bit like taking a poison pill," he said. "It was very, very scary. I'll be honest, it was one of the most stressful times of my life."

Pre-COVID, Bird Rock Coffee Roasters staffed its six San Diego stores with 90 people. During the shut-down, Taylor and his business partners — Fred Polzin and a Kansas City-based investment group — had to furlough all but 10 staff.

Bird Rock Coffee Roasters was founded in 2002 by San Diego native Chuck Patton, who roasted his coffee in a sublet restaurant kitchen and sold it at local farmer's markets and via home delivery. In 2006, he opened the company's flagship shop in a defiant location — across from a Starbucks on La Jolla Boulevard — to show the community how fundamentally different the products were.

Taylor, whose friends and employees call him "JT," entered the picture as the founder of PT's Coffee Roasting Company in Topeka, Kansas, which purchased Bird Rock Coffee Roasters in 2017. Taylor was working as a photojournalist at the Topeka Capital Journal newspaper in 1990, when a search for a latte in his new hometown produced nothing.

"Only gas station coffee, that was it, or Folger's at the grocery store," he said. "I couldn't believe that lattes hadn't made it from Seattle to Topeka yet."

He decided to fill the need himself.

"I figured I would do it as a side project, but I became passionate about it," he said. "I started taking trips to Guatemala in 2000. And I've been sourcing coffee, going directly to farmers, every year since."

A couple of those trips were taken with Patton, Taylor recalled, "and that's how I ended up here." (Patton remains with Bird Rock Coffee Roasters' head of buying.)

What has kept the small coffee chain afloat, Taylor said, are online sales of its coffee beans, which increased six-fold during the first few months of the pandemic.

"The love our customers showed us was unbelievable," Taylor said. "Also, I'm sure they were worried they wouldn't be able to get coffee, too!"

A Paycheck Protection Program loan from the Small Business Administration didn't hurt, either.

"It gave us the security blanket and allowed us to make sure we got our staff paid," Taylor said. "Using that money to pay the payroll during that period allowed us to put some money in the bank that got us through the next two months."

Sales are now back to about 85 percent of pre-COVID levels, Taylor said, with a 2 or 3 percent weekly increase.

"I wouldn't say we're doing great," he said. "I think we're still missing some of the tourists we had before, and the people who would have come to meet friends but don't do that anymore."

"But we're doing OK."



Jeff Taylor, shown at Bird Rock Coffee Roasters' flagship La Jolla location, purchased the small San Diego coffeehouse chain along with business partners in 2017.

Café pinpoints UCSD, local support as saviors

Name: Pinpoint Café

Location: 8755 Biological Grade, La Jolla

Phone: (858) 952-2550

Hours: 7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Monday through Friday

Location: 7855 Ivanhoe Ave., La Jolla

Phone: (858) 519-6635

Hours: 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Saturday

Co-owners: Aline and Caroline Comenale



Aline Comenale, who co-owns Pinpoint Café with her sister, took over the former Cups Coffee at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in 2018.

Immediately following the March 16 shutdown, Aline Comenale resolved not to panic about how her small business, the Pinpoint Café, might be impacted.

Then she saw what researchers and professors carried with them while exiting Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO) at the end of their workday on March 18.

"They were taking their plants," Comenale recalled, "and I was like, uh-oh."

Comenale closed the location within two days and didn't reopen it until six months later, on Sept. 21, when she estimates about a quarter of the staff and students had trickled back.

Fortunately for Comenale and her sister/business partner, Caroline, USCD agreed not to charge them rent during SIO's closure.

"That was huge for us," Comenale said. "We're so grateful to them."

There was no similar offer at Pinpoint's other location, a kiosk at 7855 Ivanhoe Ave. in La Jolla. So the sisters decided to keep it open. For the month of March, business was down an average of 70 percent.

"We had days with 50 dollars in the cash register only," Comenale said.

The sisters applied for and received Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster loans from the Small Business Administration. Because of their small staffs, the relief wasn't a significant amount, Comenale said, "but it was helpful." (Before COVID, Pinpoint had seven employees. Now, it has three — not including Caroline, who is on family leave.)

In 2009, the Comenale sisters relocated from Brazil, where Aline was a prototype engineer for Volkswagen and Caroline a banker. They landed jobs at La Jolla's Brick & Bell to learn the American coffee business inside and out.

It wasn't coffee the sisters fell in love with as much as the thrill of running their own business for the first time. In 2017, they took over the coffee kiosk near the La Jolla Post Office formerly known as Latte by the Sea. A year later, they similarly assumed ownership of the former Cups Coffee at SIO.

Revenue at both locations increased incrementally. Three times a week, they rented the commercial kitchen from the adjacent Congregational Church of La Jolla to hand-make burritos and salads. They remodeled their kiosk from a tent to a wooden structure. They even entered talks with UCSD about opening new locations.

Then COVID hit.

"I always try to look on the bright side," Comenale said. "What I got from this situation is hearing from the customers that they're glad we're here every day."

Seven months later, business at the kiosk has returned nearly to pre-COVID levels.

"People need their coffee," she explained. "It's very essential. Also, we don't rely on tourists. We rely on the locals who live around there and the workers who are returning to the offices and the restaurants now."

"We'll make it through this."