

# ventana

FINE LIVING IN VENTURA COUNTY monthly

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### The Grapes of Shangri-La

Two decades after a disease decimated the region's vineyards, a growing cadre of winemakers is again asking the question, "Can the Ojai Valley become a world-class wine growing spot?"

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Between oak trees and vines of robust, masculine red wine grapes, a table is set for two

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Offering more than a quick caffeine fix, the local coffee house is a social institution—and the increasingly rare site of interpersonal communication in an online

## ABOUT TOWN

### Beyond the Buzz

Offering more than a quick caffeine fix, the local coffee house is a social institution—and the increasingly rare site of interpersonal communication in an online world

By **Anne Z. Cooke**



"The pour-over method, that's the best way to do it," says Mike Colston, inserting a filter in a single-cup holder and reaching for the Ethiopian beans. "Coffee made cup-by-cup from freshly roasted beans is something to be appreciated and savored, like fine wine." The customer, standing at the counter in Element Coffee Lounge, Colston's coffee house in Camarillo, watches as he drips a bit of water over the grounds, just enough to wet them. As the moisture spreads, a rich aroma with a hint of fruit wafts upward, the promise of a startling sensation. He pauses then pours the rest of the cup. "This is the moment when a customer discovers that a cup made this way tastes nothing like coffee you buy at Starbucks or the Coffee Bean," he says.

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## SHORT LIST

## TABLE TALK

### Take it from the Toques

Local chefs dish on their favorite summer ingredient



The caffeine congregation, a daily ritual outside Palermo in Downtown Ventura.

Colston, immersed in the arcane minutiae of coffee flavors and origins, is a man of parts, as complicated as the coffee he sells. "Once I began to learn about coffee, I had to do it with excellence," he tells me. But it wasn't coffee that drew him to this storefront location in Old Town Camarillo.



Indoors at Palermo, the warm vibe encourages loitering.

"My passion began with the coffee shop culture," he says, "an inviting alternative to home, office, or school, a place where people can relax and meet friends, or sit in a corner and read. We've got sofas and chairs where people can talk, or use their laptops or play checkers. Book clubs come in occasionally, and so does a knitting group."

Coffee houses are nothing new, of course. A fixture in urban centers, the corner chain store works for a quick cup of joe and yesterday's muffin. But Ventura County's independent coffee houses are as beguiling as their coffee. Here among the lemon groves and strawberry fields, where plowed earth and steep hills

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divide neighborhoods, coffee houses are like fly paper; they bring people together.



Barista Andrew Murphy takes the slow road to a perfect cup-by-cup of joe at Camarillo's Element Coffee Lounge. Photo by Tony Sintic.

"It's a community melting pot here," says Rick Stewart, co-owner of Palermo, a popular coffee house in Downtown Ventura. "We get hundreds of customers every week, everybody from students and shoppers to business people and retirees. Some people stay for a few minutes, some for hours."

When Stewart leased the space ten years ago Palermo was an interior design and furnishings store with a coffee bar. Now it's a full-fledged coffee house, with a tiny gift and greeting card corner and a partnership with a local roasting company. In a busy week, Palermo grinds up to 250 pounds of fresh-roasted beans, brewing coffee all day in four-cup drip pots.





The garden patio at Full of Beans offers a tranquil counterpoint to downtown coffee dens.

Our customers are looking for that one-on-one experience,” says Jennifer Wheir, the manager. “Small independent guys like us can take the time to create a personal atmosphere, the kind of environment where people can connect.” A self-described purist who prefers her java black, Wheir says her current favorite bean is “La Flor,” from Guatemala. For latte lovers, she recommends Palermo’s two best sellers: “the Viennese,” whose secret recipe includes vanilla and a hint of cinnamon, and “the “Buddy,” a half-chai, half-coffee latte. Also in Palermo’s cornucopia of goodies look for frappacinos, horchatta, hot chocolate, and lemonade, as well as bagels, croissants, sweet rolls, brownies, and cheesecake. The gelato wins rave reviews.





George Lemire takes a break from his handyman gig at FOB to strum an original tune.

Just inland from Palermo, on Highway 33 midway between Ventura and Ojai, the brightly colored façade of Full of Beans invites passersby and regular patrons to linger over a cup. Out back there's an art-filled garden patio where musicians play and local groups from teachers to paramedics gather. "Motorcycle-friendly, bicycle-friendly, and dog-friendly," the coffee house also offers a "horse-friendly" hitch out front, as if to say, Welcome to the Ojai Valley. (FOB was located on Seaward Avenue in Ventura, near the beach, for nearly two decades.) Unlike most other local coffee houses, Full of Beans is set away from the street, and on warm summer evenings with the patio festooned in twinkling lights and a guitarist softly strumming, the setting has an undeniable magic.





At Ojai Coffee Roasting Co., art celebrates the coffee house tradition.  
Photo by Logan Riley.

The Ojai Coffee Roasting Company, in the heart of Downtown Ojai, started small, roasting beans for their own use. But this was a coffee town, ripe for a community hangout and a cozy café. Today owners Kent and Stacey Jones share the honors, Stacey creating the menus and Kent roasting the beans, supplying fresh-roasted coffee to local B&Bs, restaurants, and, more recently, Whole Foods.



The garden patio at Full of Beans in Ojai.

“People use this place for everything,” says Kent. “Meetings, lunch with friends, even as a home office. My daughter and her friends do their homework here after school, and I give them a

discount. She calls it 'the half-price homework hangout.'"

Like all roasting companies, Ojai Roaster buys green beans in bulk because they have an exceptionally long shelf life. But once roasted, the flavor degrades. "In the first week, the coffee is amazing. In the second week, it's superior. Older than two weeks, and your coffee will be lackluster," he says. "Come in and see what real coffee tastes like." It's a promise. ●

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OJAI COFFEE ROASTING CO.

337 East Ojai Ave., Ojai; ojaicoffeeroastingco.com

FULL OF BEANS

11534 North Ventura Ave., Ojai; fullofbeanscoffeehouse.net

PALERMO

321 East Main St., Downtown Ventura;  
palermoventura.com

ELEMENT COFFEE LOUNGE

2364 Ventura Blvd., Old Town Camarillo;  
elementcoffeelounge.com

Photos by Gary and Pierre Silva (except where noted)

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