

Lamorinda Businesses Catch the WiFi Wave

By Jennifer Wake

With the explosion of wireless Internet use, local restaurants and businesses have been expanding operations into the Ether, adding WiFi networks – which provide wireless, high speed connectivity for computer users – to their businesses to attract new customers.

When the owner of SiSi Caffè, Cathy Corsi, decided to upgrade the computer system at her Moraga café two months ago, the technician suggested she add the WiFi component.

“I thought, ‘Why not?’” she said. “We have been wanting to do it for a long time, but never got it done.” Corsi now sees patrons conducting business meetings or doing homework on their computers both inside her café and outside on her patio tables.

The difference with SiSi Caffè, however, is that the connection is free. Although there are many establishments in the Lamorinda area that offer WiFi connection, such as the Starbuck’s in Orinda’s Theatre Square, many of them charge for the service.

Panache Café in Lafayette, which also offers free WiFi access, installed the system to attract customers to their shop near Trader Joe’s. “We hoped people would come in to use the Internet and stay to buy some coffee,” said one employee.

The idea is working.

On a quiet Wednesday morning, Training Coordinator Laura Duede sat at a corner table, files surrounding her open laptop, a steaming cup of coffee close within reach.

“I was in the area and looking for an Internet café,” Duede said. “My friend from Lafayette told me to come here. When I do work remotely, it’s better than working at home. I get a lot more done at coffee shops.”

And it’s not just cafés that are catching on. In the past few years, WiFi connections have been popping up at locations throughout the United States, including bus and airport terminals, local McDonalds restaurants, and even campgrounds in obscure locations like Columbia Falls, Montana. Cities like Pleasanton and parts of the Silicon Valley have installed WiFi transmitters to provide free network access for outdoor seating at downtown businesses.

Saint Mary’s College has WiFi systems in their library as well many classrooms and other areas on campus. They intend to include WiFi in all of its dorms by next year.

For SiSi Caffè employee Ali Drury, who attends UC Davis, having WiFi as a college student is vital. “I can bring my laptop to campus and get work done between classes,” she said. “We had to have wireless in our apartment. We have six people, and that’s six computers.” The trick is making sure the connection is strong enough for the demand. Some business owners in cities offering the free service complain about spotty access to the Internet from sidewalk cafes and in dining rooms, and Jet Blue has had complaints by passengers who were



Ruben (19), searches the Internet at SiSi Caffè, Moraga



unable to log on to the airline’s free service because of an overloaded system. For now, Lamorinda cities are taking a wait-and-see approach before installing the service on a broad scale, relying on individual business owners to take the lead.

For Corsi, it’s all about stepping into the 21st century. “I’m so excited about doing this,” she said.

For a partial list of WiFi locations in the Lamorinda area, visit www.wi-fihotspotlist.com.

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