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## Lamorinda Entrepreneurs Find Recipes to Beat the Recession

*By Sophie Braccini*



Steve Benjamins playing a Baby Grand in his new Lafayette location Photo Sophie Braccini

What is bad news for some is an opportunity for others. In spite of the gloom, entrepreneurs continue to launch new businesses in Lamorinda. From frozen yogurt, to repair shops, to stationary, they are ready to work hard to benefit from new consumer trends or position themselves to take advantage of the recovery, when it comes.

"It can seem counter-intuitive to open a new stationary store in times like these," says Andrew Han, the owner of Elmwood Stationers in Berkeley who will open a second store in Lafayette in July, "but it is a good time to negotiate advantageous terms with property owners, to rationalize business practices, and if we can make it through this difficult time, we will be better positioned when the recovery comes."

Han has been very successful on College Avenue selling the beautiful specialty stationary items he loves, such as high quality journals, paper invitations and note cards, as well as business supplies. He knew the owner of the previous Lafayette stationary store and was aware of his inventory issues. "With two stores we can transfer inventory back and forth and try new things," adds Han, "and since we'll buy larger quantities, we will get bigger discounts." Han is expecting his new Lafayette location to open on July 13.

The two frozen yogurt shops that opened in May in Lafayette are banking on the fact that people want to indulge, but for a reasonable price and possibly in a healthy way.

The first one to open is located inside Flippers at 960 Moraga Road; it's a MYO Pure Frozen Yogurt franchise. Molly and Paige Meyer started this business in Walnut Creek. They claim to offer only fresh yogurt with live culture in a wide variety of flavors and toppings that is sold by the weight. "For a few dollars people can get a treat that's healthy and delicious," says Paige Meyer. The location, which is close to both an elementary and a middle school, has been doing well.

A few blocks away at 3518-A Mt. Diablo Blvd, Yogurt Shack, which operates under a similar business model, is off to a successful start. The store sells yogurt by the weight with a large choice of toppings. For the Coccimiglio's it is a family affair with parents and daughter running franchises in Danville and Lafayette. In all their locations, the mix of healthy and affordable treats is a winning ticket. Last April, Time Magazine reported that chocolate sales all over the planet seemed to be immune to recession and continued to grow. A customer summarized the trend that seems to work in Lafayette as well, "We may not be able to buy luxuries any more, but we can still splurge on small pleasures like chocolate," or yogurt!

Repair service is another good niche for tough times. It appeals to people who want to spend less and to those who want to waste less. Three businesses have recently opened or moved to Lamorinda that focus on this market trend.

Tick Tock in Moraga is a clock and watch repair shop (read details in our May 27 issue at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com>) and the second store for its owner.

Richard Yom, on the other hand, repairs cell phones.

At 3541 Plaza Way he opened Prostar - Sprint PCS store where he will sell what he believes are the best value networks in town and to further serve his clientele he will replace that broken screen on an out of warrantee phone or change a broken port. "I took a special training in phone repairs," explains the former software

engineer, "because I saw that phones were getting more and more expensive and people were in need of repairs." A Moraga resident, Yom moved his business from Vallejo to Lafayette to work closer to home.

Another repair shop expanded in Lafayette recently, Restoration Piano by Benjamins Piano Tuning opened a large warehouse at 3434 Golden Gate Way in Lafayette. Business owner Steve Benjamins tunes, repairs, restores, rents and sells pianos on consignment. "I can do anything that has to do with a piano," says the man who can play at events as well. But for him, it is not the repairs that are keeping his business afloat. "It might be that new place where I can warehouse pianos that will save my business," says Benjamins.

Benjamins explains that when people are losing their jobs, their homes, piano are hard to move and there's a hemorrhage of free pianos on Craigslist. "The only part of my business that's growing is the consignment sales," he says, "I can pick and choose remarkable instruments. For those who have money, it's a great time to buy a piano." His large warehouse features baby grand and uprights from different centuries. "This is a tough time for musicians," admits Benjamins, "but we live in a community with a lot of very talented adult and youth and it will always be my joy to see kids grow and families change because they have found the right piano."

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