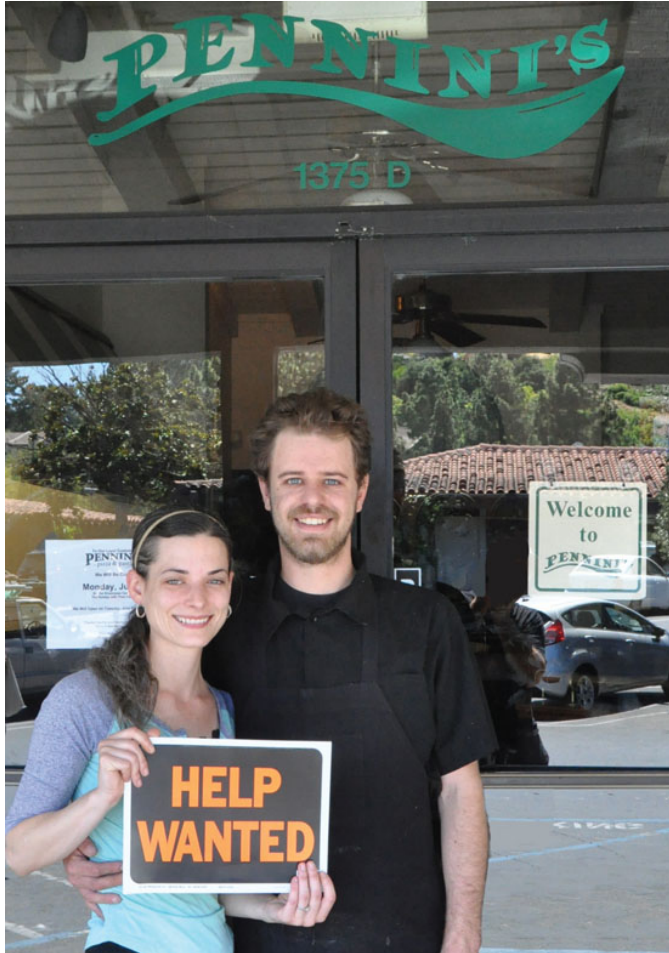


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'Help Wanted' is Becoming a Familiar Sign in Moraga

By Jennifer Wake



Pennini's manager Dawn Fischer and her fiancé sous-chef Declan Johnston are looking to hire. Photo Andy Scheck

and not in retail, or don't work, and the labor pool has very little people 18 and under looking for a job. In the year I have been open, I have had only three people apply that were 18 or under," he says. "The majority of the younger population does not need to work; they choose to work, and a lot of them choose not to work. The labor pool is tiny for the labor demand."

Since many of the retail businesses pay minimum wage, and those jobs are currently plentiful in other areas, like Concord, people can find work closer to home and don't need to come to places like Moraga for a job.

Fulmer says it is rare that someone will drive through Orinda or Lafayette to work in Moraga. "In Orinda, Walnut Creek and Lafayette, the pay is more competitive, the tips are higher, and the commute is shorter," he says.

Saleh says pay scale plays a big factor because businesses in Moraga are not busy enough to offer the higher pay that's expected, and nearby cities have a higher minimum wage as well.

Some businesses, like McCaulou's and Dover Saddlery offer discounts on merchandise to entice workers, but turnover can be high for many businesses offering part-time minimum wage jobs, which currently pay \$10 per hour in Moraga.

"I have had only one employee that has lasted more than a few weeks that has driven through Orinda or Lafayette to work at my business," says Fulmer.

Walk the promenade at Moraga or Rheem Valley shopping centers and you'll see a common window display: help wanted signs.

In Moraga, Bianca's Deli, Mucho Wraps, Pennini's, and Moraga Hardware and Lumber, Across the Way, Lamorinda Pizza, Moraga Produce, Mountain Mike's, Tangelo and Graze all sport various signs in windows seeking extra help. Orinda and Lafayette seem less impacted, but signs can still be found at Jamba Juice, Chipotle, and Yogurt Shack near Whole Foods or at McCaulou's in all three Lamorinda locations.

Moraga 7-11 owner Samir Saleh says the biggest challenge is finding employees from within the community. "I think it's more difficult due the community being too small and the cost of living [being] very high, so everyone would rather reach out to the city or somewhere where it pays better."

He said he had to reach out to stores outside the area, like Concord and Antioch, where they get more applicants. "Moraga, being far from the freeway and BART, makes it difficult for people to keep jobs in Moraga."

Ted Fulmer opened his Moraga café, GRAZE, in the Rheem Valley Shopping Center a year ago, and says finding an employee with experience is tough - and finding an employee with experience in your industry is rare.

Fulmer says the Moraga labor pool has few people over 25 looking for a job.

"The over-25 people either work out of town

If someone wants to work, Fulmer says another issue arises, namely scheduling.

One Moraga Shopping Center retailer, who asked not to be named, said she has had applicants who are parents of school-aged children who only want to work when their kids are in school. "They don't want to work on weekends and want the summers off," she says. "That doesn't work for retail."

Fulmer says the younger employees want to work on their own schedule, which often conflicts with the needs of the employer. "They'll say, 'I'm only available in the summer, weekends only, I will be gone for a month. I can work only two to three hours a day.'"

And the job experience of these younger employees is lacking, he says.

"Virtually all of my applicants are between 19 and 25. Most of them have never worked or had one brief job experience," Fulmer says. "Teaching someone how to sweep, clean, chop, and basic customer service is not something you have to do with new employees in other areas."

The current unemployment rate in Contra Costa County is 4.4 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, but Saleh says he's not sure if the low unemployment rate plays a factor in finding qualified help. "I do know one thing: at this current time, there are more jobs than people applying."

"Moraga has its own economic, social, and demographic realities," Fulmer says. "It just happens to be in Contra Costa County."

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