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Staffing shortages, COVID restrictions challenge coffee houses, other businesses

By M.D. Jones



Papillon in Lafayette's La Fiesta Square has weathered the pandemic with small adjustments. Photo J. Wake

The pandemic has affected businesses in many ways, like shortened hours recently announced at Moraga Hardware & Lumber and Across the Way to due to severe staffing shortages and ongoing health and safety concerns - and our local coffee shops are no exception. There was a recent stir on social media about limited hours for the Moraga Starbucks coffee shop as well as it being closed for a few weeks in January. According to Shift Manager Maricella Quintero, Starbucks has strict pandemic protocols to protect staff and clients. Every day, employees must have their temperature checked, fill out a COVID questionnaire and have signature confirmation by themselves and their manager to screen out people who might have COVID-19 before they can start their shift. Twice this past January the location had to shut down for the county's required 10 days because of potential COVID-19 exposure.

As staff slowly returned based on their timeline for exposure, the coffee shop had limited hours - sometimes closing as early as 1 p.m. "In this situation Starbucks

feels bad they can't provide the customer service they want to but we want to make sure people stay safe in the community. It may be hard for customers to understand we are doing this for their health," Quintero said. "We have had to adjust in the moment. If 2 to 3 people show up with symptoms that's half our staff and so we would have to do things like close the café for walk-ins and only service the drive thru." Making things more difficult during the virus surge "some people will not wear a mask at the drive thru which makes it hard for us to mitigate the risk of our employees picking up the virus," Quintero said. "Fortunately, we can handle things better because we are corporate and can have employees cover from other stores versus a mom and pop who might not be able to have extra coverage that Starbucks has as a company."

Across town at Si Si Caffé in Moraga, owner Cathy Corsi noticed that business went up about 20% while Starbucks was closed. "We knew they were Starbucks customers by the way they ordered their drinks. They'd say 'I'd like a grande such and such,'" said Corsi. Because of COVID, Si Si has had to close the inside of their café to the public but was lucky enough to have windows that open outside to the front of the café where drinks and food continue to be ordered and served. In the back of the café is an outdoor seating area which was also able to remain open through the pandemic.

When asked about recent inflation as the pandemic subsides, Corsi stated that the costs of supplies are up a good 15-20% overall but "we try to be sensitive to our customers and keep our costs the same or go up in small increments if we have to." As far as having the staff needed to run the cafe, Corsi stated, "Luckily we're a family run business so we didn't need to rely as much on outside help. We also have Saint Mary's students working for us. We're fortunate that Si Si's Caffé has had such a loyal following, like kids from JM who use the Si Si's gift cards and hang out in the back."

Local Lafayette café Papillon was also able to stay open through COVID. Owners Sam and Betty Sukh did not notice a huge difference in traffic during the pandemic and couldn't shut down because "Lafayette rent is super high." Even so, they had to limit hours to between 6 a.m. and 1 p.m. for about six months during the pandemic because of difficulty finding employees. They are now back to being open 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays and 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekends.

"The biggest change we have seen is the cost of our supplies," Sam Sukh said. "Some supplies have gone up about 50%. Boxes of 1,000 coffee cups used to be \$50 but now they are \$75 to \$80. It's double now for plastic cups. Suppliers have said prices will come down but I don't see when that will happen. Sixteen-ounce coffee cups are almost impossible to find in the Bay Area. Still, we don't increase our prices until we absolutely have to and are waiting another month or two before we reevaluate our menu prices."

Even with the higher cost of running the business, things are looking better. According to Sukh, Papillon has recently hired a new person and is getting ready to hire one to two more employees by summer.

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