



brought high-end espresso drinks to a community largely devoid of such luxuries, which are usually saved for those living “in town.”

These caffeinated outposts are largely the brainchild of Meg Enns, a coffee-lover who wanted to bring together her love of her adopted rural hometown and her passion for coffee. Given the dominance of national chain coffee shops such as Starbucks and Caribou Coffee (which has a location in Hunt Valley Town Centre, just down the road from both Filling Stations), it was a business gamble, but one that seems to be paying off.

“I thought for sure that people in this area had to have a refined palate,” says Enns. “And it was frustrating for me, living here, to have to drive 15 minutes into Timonium for a cup of coffee. For me, [starting the business] was selfish. I wanted to shorten my trip and have a nice cup of coffee and baked goods to enrich my life.”

Enns is no stranger to good coffee. A Florida native, the 42-year-old discovered her love for java on a trip to Italy in 1990. At the time, she was living in Atlanta and working as a personal fitness trainer. Upon her return to the U.S., she realized there were no good coffee shops in Atlanta. So she started researching American coffee shops and places to source beans, strictly for her own use. She doesn’t quite know how it happened, but eventually, “I just had a passion for coffee that grew larger than my passion for exercise.”

Enns found an old building in Atlanta that she turned into a coffee shop and beer and wine bar. She lived in a loft above the shop and eventually was able to open a second location. The shop hosted live music, which is how Enns met a New York City-based jazz group called Medeski Martin & Wood. Impressed by her abilities, the group made her an offer she couldn’t refuse: move to New York and become their tour manager. Enns sold the coffee shops and relocated to the Big Apple.

After four years in New York, though, Enns felt she was ready for a change of scenery—plus, she’d exhausted her finances. On the recommendation of an old friend and Sparks

Bean counters: Meg Enns, *left*, and Mary Kremzner outside the newest Filling Station, on York Road.

Fill 'Er Up

Two java mavens are proving that local coffeeshops can work—even in the country.

By Christianna McCausland

At nine in the morning on a Saturday afternoon in July, the cars are lining up in long rows outside an old gas station on York Road in Sparks. But the cars’ owners are waiting for fuel of a different kind: coffee.

The Filling Station, just north of the now-bustling Hunt Valley Towne Centre (the original location is on Falls Road at Shawan Road), has cornered the market on rural coffee sales and

resident, Mary Kremzner, she moved to Maryland in 2000. “I had decided that the country life was calling me,” says Enns.

Enns came to Maryland half-heartedly continuing her work with the jazz group and working an Internet job, but was really looking for something to do. That’s when she went to the produce market at Falls and Shawan roads and saw a “For Rent” sign in a tiny former gas station across the street. “I was like ‘oh no,’ because as soon as I saw the sign I saw the whole coffee shop, I saw the whole vision,” says Enns. “But I had no idea what this area was like. I was a stranger in a strange land.”

Having been a business owner before, Enns wasn’t in a hurry to do it again. But that little filling station haunted her. Eventually she told her friend Kremzner about her idea; Kremzner convinced Enns that she *had* to make it into a coffee shop, and agreed to put up the financing for the first location.

“I really believed in Meg’s ability. Meg’s a vision person,” says Kremzner, a 44-year-old pharmacist for the FDA. “When she sees something, she can make it happen. She just needed the help to make it happen.”

Enns loves giving old buildings new life, so the gas station was the perfect canvas for her creative touch. Harkening back to the station’s former life, she decorated the coffee shop to reflect the “Filling Station” theme. She had a little under \$20,000 with which to transform the impossibly small shop (it’s only about 140 square feet), so she called on every friend she new. People from New York to Texas came to volunteer in the construction. When they opened in November, 2001, “We never dreamed we’d be open six months, much less six years,” says Enns.

But when the doors opened, a funny thing happened: People came in droves. They came to buy coffee, but they also came with flowers, with well wishes, with old stories of the building’s golden days as the community filling station, and even with cash donations. “I’ll never forget this one woman who came in and said, ‘I don’t drink coffee but I love what you’re doing,’ and she gave me twenty dollars,” says Enns.

Theaux Le Gardeur started going to The Filling Station the first week it opened. A Butler resident, it was perfectly located on his

drive to his Monkton fly-fishing shop, Backwater Angler. He explains that as a small business owner himself, he likes supporting small, community-based businesses where service comes first. He may stop into one or both locations several times a day. For him, the Filling Stations have become akin to the indispensable general store of old.

“At the Falls Road location in the morning, if you wait a half an hour, you can wave to 10 to 12 people you know,” says Le Gardeur. “I think they have a real sense of community with these shops.”

“I don’t know why I care so much,” says Enns. “I guess it’s because coffee is the legal drug.”

Le Gardeur, a New Orleans native, is a reformed double-espresso drinker who now opts mostly for green tea. He says you’ll be hard pressed to find him at a coffee shop in a mall—and not just because he can’t find parking. “There’s so much turnover with chain-type operations,” he says, “and one thing Meg and Mary do a great job of is keeping their folks on for a long time so as a customer you get to know the people behind the counter.”

Enns takes the training of her baristas very seriously and does training every three to four months. After years of sampling coffee (at events called “cuppings”) she found her coffee source, a small batch roaster on the west coast who uses fair trade, organic, shade grown beans from Guatemala (she won’t reveal more about her source).

“It sounds ridiculous, but there’s an art and a science to making a good cup of coffee,” says Enns. “I don’t know why I care so much. I guess it’s because coffee is the legal drug,” she quips.

High off the success of the first location, Enns and Kremzner found another languishing gas station, this one on York Road. The spot offered them new opportunities: the chance to own the property, the chance to invest more into the design of the place, and the chance to

open up shop on the major north-south artery coffee drinkers drive each day.

The pair bought the former Sparks Filling Station in spring of 2006, and spent six months remodeling it. At 1,100 square feet, its size is a luxury compared to Falls Road’s quaint but cramped quarters. “All our loyal customers came here and people were fighting to be the first coffee sold,” Kremzner recalls of the second store’s opening. Many regulars from the first location now turn up at York Road; it turns out they were driving all the way across the valley to get their coffee fix.

“When Caribou Coffee and the Hunt Valley Mall opened it did change business at the original location,” Enns recalls. “But people came back. Real coffee drinkers are going to come to our place, not a chain store.”

But one can’t deny the power of the chain store entirely. Enns admits that Starbucks has set the bar high on coffee menus, so that any shop that wants to survive better have a caramel macchiato on the menu.

The Filling Stations get about 200 guests a day and each consume about 320 pounds of coffee a month. Currently, vanilla lattes are the most popular item sold, although Enns and Kremzner are both double short drinkers: two shots of espresso in a 10 ounce cup with steamed milk (no sugar). The business has gotten other upgrades as well, including gift cards that can be redeemed at either location. The business partners also have protected their brand by copyrighting their logo.

Now that the operation has grown, Enns and Kremzner rarely have time for anything other than work. One or both of the owners can be spotted driving the rural roads of the valley that connect the two locations in Kremzner’s bright red 1970 VW Karmann Ghia convertible, which has become the de facto company car.

As for whether or not there will be a third Filling Station, there are no details they will reveal at the moment—but it’s safe to say Enns and Kremzner are always on the lookout for a new place to fill up. **E**

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