

Wednesday, 11/15/06

## Coffee shops double as office space for telecommuters

By JOE PAGETTA

*For Brentwood Journal*

**BRENTWOOD** — When you're an independent everything like me — musician, songwriter, publicist, writer — you tend to spend an inordinate amount of time in coffee shops.

The home is full of distractions: laundry that needs to be done, the leak in the ceiling that needs to be fixed or the cat mess that needs to be cleaned up before the wife comes home and notes that the cats were his before they got married.

If you live in northern Williamson County, have a wireless-enabled laptop and enjoy a little people-watching while working, Brentwood offers a wide array of options for getting some work done outside of the house.

Let's go.

### **Don't take my favorite table**

Panera Bread, just over the Davidson County line on Old Hickory Boulevard, is my main coffee shop and where I spend most mornings. It has an open floor plan and plenty of windows to let in sunlight and remind you there's a world outside. A diverse mix of people gathers in the mornings adding to the vibe. There are some Bible-study groups, businessmen and women, brides-to-be meeting with wedding planners, a few parents with their kids and the occasional musician.

Two things, however, can threaten my experience the moment I walk through the door. The first is someone else sitting at my usual table. It's the perfect spot, a two-top with a comfy bench on one side and an electrical outlet nearby on the wall in case my laptop needs charging. It also offers the perfect view of who's coming and going.

The second is that I'm sometimes confused with another patron who apparently looks like me and spends an equally inordinate amount of time there. I know this because sometimes when I get to the counter I'm asked if I want a chocolate muffin, which I do not. I've gotten into the habit now of saying "that's the other guy," to which the cashier says, "Argh! I just can't get it right. He looks just like you!" Who is this imposter? Is he

being offered a whole-grain bagel with peanut butter? Does he wonder about me? I must find him and see what I look like.

Said whole-grain bagel, sliced but not toasted with organic peanut butter, is excellent. As are any of the three soufflés.

Coffee-wise, I'm a traditionalist, and usually go with black coffee in the morning or a skim latte in the afternoon. I always get it in a mug. It tastes better that way. Coffee refills are free, as is the wireless. If you're going to drink more than one cup, do yourself a favor and go with the darker blend over the house blend. It's less acidic over the long haul.

### **They just sell the coffee**

Just down the shopping center from Panera is the Starbucks inside Target. I'm not sure what to make of this, and why anyone would actually choose to hang out here is suspicious.

Sure it's a Starbucks, and serves Starbucks beverages, but it's hard to deny the fact that you're still hanging out in Target.

And is it really a Starbucks? I recently bought a beverage at another Starbucks (Franklin Road, next to the Blockbuster) and was given a receipt with a Web address where I could go online, answer a few questions and receive a code to get a free beverage of my choice on my next visit to a Starbucks.

When I decided a few days later that I needed some underwear at Target, I thought I'd grab my free coffee.

"We don't accept those," I was told. "We're not really a Starbucks like other Starbucks." What does that mean? I don't know and don't want an explanation. This one's recommended only if you need a pickup before or after shopping.

### **Friendly and simple**

Speaking of, why not just skip the Starget (I just made that up) and try one of the two fine drive-through coffee stops just minutes away.

On Franklin Road and Town Center Way sits the Hot Spot. Relatively no-frills and low-key, it's the perfect option when you're on the go. The service is super-friendly, and because you're in a car, they can sweeten your drink the way you like it.

I have had both hot and cold lattes (I only sweeten espresso-based drinks, if you're wondering) here and they were both perfect. Add one of their tasty almond-chocolate biscottis to dip and you're ready to risk your life turning left onto Franklin Road.

In the other direction is the well-named Caffino — same concept, but with a shinier exterior. The parking lot can be a little dangerous to navigate, but it's worth the risk. They sometimes clap and cheer if you tip.

### **Bongo roasts it right**

Heading west, you've got Alpine Bagel in the Maryland Farms area. Alpine serves locally roasted Bongo Java Roasting Co. coffee, my pick for the best coffee in town. Good bagels and easygoing service, coupled with the free wireless, make it a good place to get some work done — in theory.

On a recent late-morning visit, I found most of the self-serve coffee urns almost empty, and what coffee I was able to gather by combining three different varieties was warm at best. I was also unable to connect to the location's wireless Internet. A solicitation for assistance from the assistant manager yielded a blank stare.

The sandwiches are good, so for a breakfast meeting, or lunch if you work in the area, Alpine definitely does the trick. Spend a lot of time working in coffee shops? Alpine may not be the best decision.

### **Stop here for the bagels**

I've had many breakfasts at Brueggers in the Kroger shopping center on Franklin Road. The bagels may be the best in the area, and the place is packed in the morning with commuters stopping in for coffee and breakfast-to-go.

Stay a little longer and watch women coming from (or going to?) tennis matches (or lessons?). Again, like Alpine, it's a fine place to grab coffee or catch up with a friend or business acquaintance, but perhaps not to spend a lot of time hanging around pretending to work.

### **Coffee in a beer mug**

Not far from Brueggers is the Borders Cafe. No man can exist without flipping through a magazine every now and then, so this one's a no-brainer. Like I mentioned, if you're an independent everything, it's important to keep abreast of what's going on in the music world or which publications which might accept an article or publish a feature about a client.

There is a charge for wireless at Borders, and I'll get to my thoughts on this in a minute. The fresh-brewed coffee is sufficiently hot and tasty. The pumpkin spice is a nice touch for the fall. I had a humorous experience there not too long ago when asking for a double. The barista, and I'm using the term loosely here, didn't know what I wanted.

"You just want the coffee part?" she asked. Yes, I told her.

"Eww ... that's gross."

"What do you mean it's gross?" I told her. "It's the base of everything you have up on that board."

"I don't even know how to make that," she confided. I told her to just pull two shots of espresso and put them in a cup, and even offered to come back and help her.

Ringling me up became another challenge, which worked out to my benefit as she finally charged me only \$1.15. When I downed the two shots in two gulps, I thought she was going to run out of the cafe screaming in horror. I imagine her telling her girlfriends later that night about the weirdo dressed all in black who wanted to suck straight from the espresso machine. Yuck.

### **Starbucks in any direction**

Last but not least, there are plenty of Starbucks to choose from on the north end of Brentwood. There are three within a mile radius of my house (not counting the Starget). Say what you will about Starbucks — that they are too expensive; that they are taking over the world; that they deal in McCulture — but enter any Starbucks and you can be assured of a quality experience.

The coffee is always what you expect. A latte at the location on Old Hickory Boulevard will taste just like a latte at the location near Vann Drive in Jackson, Tenn. If you're traveling down to Memphis on I-40 and need a mid-trip pickup, you can count on getting what you crave, along with smiling and superior service. Plus, there aren't a lot of coffee shops playing Bob Dylan's "Ballad of the Thin Man."

### **Tips and surcharges**

Where Starbucks falters is the charge for wireless. In this day and age, especially if a coffee is near \$4, charging for wireless is criminal.

While I'm at it, the tip jars need to go away. Panera and Brueggers don't have them, which is good. Starbucks, Alpine and Borders do. My problem with tip jars is not a matter of principle, or a need to receive claps and cheers, but a matter of location.

Why should I tip the person who rang up my order? If you're going to have a tip jar, take a cue from the Italians.

In Italy, you purchase your beverage at the register and take your receipt to the barista, who makes your beverage. You then tip the barista the equivalent of 50 cents to a dollar for doing a good job. It makes sense.

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