

Anchorage Daily News (AK)
February 21, 2005
Section: Money
Edition: Final
Page: F1

A different kind of joe
Terra Bella sells all-organic coffee drinks

MIDTOWN COFFEE STAND FILLS THE NATURAL NICHE

PAULA DOBBYN
Anchorage Daily News

Staff

An all-organic coffee shop -- believed to be Anchorage's first -- has cropped up on a busy stretch of Benson Boulevard in Midtown. Owner Linda Vollertsen, a jewelry maker, opened **Terra Bella** in January with her husband, Richard, an attorney. The Vollertsens had been thinking about opening a java stand for a couple of years. One day last fall, as they drove around town, they eyed a For Sale sign on a coffee hut and decided on the spot to buy it.

"We just kind of said, 'Let's do it!' " Vollertsen recalled.

She had one condition about **Terra Bella**, which means "beautiful earth" in Italian.

"It had to be organic," Vollertsen said.

The Vollertsens did virtually no market research. They just followed a hunch that demand would exist for high-quality, natural coffee and tea. Since they opened the Benson shop just west of C Street in late January, business has slowly picked up, and they hope to turn a profit within a few months, Vollertsen said.

A yoga practitioner who grew up in a Southeast logging camp, Vollertsen has favored pesticide-free food since she started having children 20 years ago.

"I ground my own wheat when I lived in Sitka" during a time when organic foods were hard to come by, she said. "Some of my friends thought I was a little weird back then."

As Americans become more health-conscious, the demand for organic food has grown. Organic food sales in the United States totaled \$11 billion in 2003 compared with \$3.5 billion in 1997, according to the Organic Trade Association. For the past six years, retail purchases of organic food have annually grown by about 20 percent, the association said.

Consumer interest in organic coffee, while still representing only a little more than 1 percent of U.S. imports by some estimates, is also perking along.

"It's one of the fastest-growing segments of the speciality coffee market," said Josh Marineau, coffee buyer and general manager of retail stores for Anchorage's Kaladi Brothers Coffee Co.

Between 40 percent and 45 percent of the coffee beans Kaladi Bros. sells is organic, Marineau said. Five years ago, it was about 10 percent to 15 percent, he said.

"It's got a lot of momentum," said Bob Lewis, owner of Coffee Cats, another local coffee roaster. "Alaskans really like their coffee, and they like to be on the cutting edge."

Unlike some shops in Anchorage that offer organic coffee with conventional milk, **Terra Bella's** products are all organic, including the milk, the syrups, the teas and even the cinnamon rolls and bagels with cream cheese.

They cost more: \$4 for a 16-ounce latte, for example, which is about a dollar higher than at most places. But organic products tend to be pricier than conventional items. So the higher costs that Vollertsen pays for the coffee, milk and other items get passed along to customers.

Several customers who were interviewed didn't seem to mind.

"I go out of my way to go there," said Georgia Blue, acting executive director of the Anchorage Museum Association. "I don't mind spending the extra money."

"I'm not a real organic nut, but I was attracted to it," said Larry Houle, general manager of the Alaska Support Industry Alliance, whose office is nearby. "They have this brewed coffee that's just absolutely wonderful. I stop there every morning, and I never used to stop at those places."

Bill Konyot, who works in the nutritional supplement room of a local doctor's office, stops by **Terra Bella** three or four times a week, he said.

"I don't drink coffee. I'm kind of odd," Konyot said. "But I do like organic and I like the health properties of tea."

He buys cups of Matcha Iri green tea from Japan or Assam Sewpur, an Indian black tea, both of which claim to be loaded with cancer-fighting antioxidants.

The all-organic coffee sign outside **Terra Bella** seems to attract attention.

On a sunny afternoon last week, Miranda Felch was parked alongside the coffee stand, waiting for her steaming beverage. "When I saw it was an organic coffee shack, I had to check it out," Felch said.

Vollertsen, who said her family arrived in Nome during the Gold Rush, said some customers have never indulged in organic coffee, and she finds herself talking about the health benefits of food that's free of pesticides, antibiotics and growth hormones. For example, a man from Mat-Su stopped by the other day and, seemingly out of curiosity, purchased a coffee.

"This guy from the Valley said, 'Organic scares me,' " she said.

Vollertsen said she gave him a brief health primer. She feels in some ways as though she's nurturing Anchorage by providing healthy alternatives: "It almost feels like an extension of that mothering."

Vollertsen gets her beans from Michael McGuire, a Homer coffee shop owner and roaster. McGuire, who started K Bay Caffe Roasting Co. about a year ago, roasts and sells only organic coffee.

In 1998, he won an international barista-of-the-year competition, which Vollertsen said caught her attention. She brought him up to Anchorage to train her employees in the art of pulling the perfect espresso shot.

Terra Bella barista Cynthia Vidal said McGuire's exacting standards were a bit intimidating at first, such as allowing the espresso shot to drip for 30 seconds and no longer.

"I'm a competent grown woman and I thought, 'I'll never be able to do this.' I was scared," Vidal joked.

Now that the store has been open for about a month, Vidal said, she's mastered the art.

Daily News reporter Paula Dobbyn can be reached at pdobbyn@adn.com or 257-4317.

Linda Vollertsen said the decision she and her husband made to buy a coffee stand was spontaneous, but she was insistent about one thing: The products had to be organic. They opened **Terra Bella** organic coffee stand on Benson Boulevard near C Street in January. The shop features high-quality, natural coffee and tea and other products.

The all-organic sign on the **Terra Bella** coffee shop seems to be attracting attention. "When I saw it was an organic coffee shack, I had to check it out," said Miranda Felch, a recent customer.