

A NEW CUP OF KAHWA

Have you noticed it yet? The giant called Starbucks is vulnerable.

Dunkin' Donuts is pushing from one side with its coffee and sandwiches. McDonald's is trumpeting customer surveys that show its coffee is the best-tasting among quick-serve operations. And smaller chains and mom-and-pops are finding success even in close proximity to 'Bucks locations. (Port City Java in Valrico does brisk business with a Starbucks only a few hundred yards away on Lithia-Pinecrest Road.) Plus, the company earned mixed reviews for closing down for three hours last month to "retrain" their baristas.

As if that weren't enough, the economy is in a tailspin. It's not exactly the best time to be selling \$4 cups of coffee.

Enter Kahwa.

In April 2006, I wrote about a new group of French and French-Canadians who had moved from Philadelphia to south St. Petersburg to start Kahwa Coffee Roasters. The goal was to provide their own brand of coffee beans, which are roasted at their facility on Eighth Avenue South, for service in premium hotels, restaurants and cafes.

The group chose St. Petersburg after visiting Sarah Perrier's Canadian family in Seminole during a vacation. Along with the very appealing un-Philadelphia-like weather, they thought the city offered an area ripe for gourmet coffee service.

The business plan took off. It has been so successful that owners **Raphael and Sarah Perrier** and **Jean and Catherine Thibault** opened a Kahwa coffee shop Tuesday at 475 Second St. N. in St. Petersburg. The Perriers and Thibaults owned four shops in Philly before they moved south.

In the 900-square-foot retail shop, Kahwa (Egyptian for "coffee") is aiming squarely at Starbucks, which has three locations within six blocks. Kahwa is perched near the border of the Old Northeast neighborhood and downtown amid a nest of lofts, bungalow-style homes and condominiums.



THE STEW
JEFF HOUCK

"We're in the perfect location," Raphael Perrier said Tuesday morning during the grand opening as customers received free coffee. (It's free all day today, too.) "Without Starbucks, we wouldn't be here. They taught Americans to appreciate better quality coffee."

Kahwa is aiming at Starbucks' price point, too. At the new shop, a regular cup of coffee — everything served is made with Kahwa-roasted beans — costs \$1.50. The most-expensive drink is a Caffe Mocha, which runs \$3.

"It's crazy to pay up to \$4 for a cup of coffee," Perrier says.

The opening attracted customers **Bill Reily, 71,** and **Monrico Lehnert, 68,** who had just finished cycling a 20-mile circuit to Pinellas Point with a group of St. Petersburg Bicycle Club members. The friends usually stop at the Atlanta Bread Co.

on First Avenue North in the downtown BayWalk complex.

"I appreciated the latte art they did on top," Lehnert says. "Most places put too much foam on top."

"I hope this place does well," Reily says.

The shop's look and hipper-than-you music selection borrows from Starbucks. But Perrier promises not to mimic the chain in one important way.

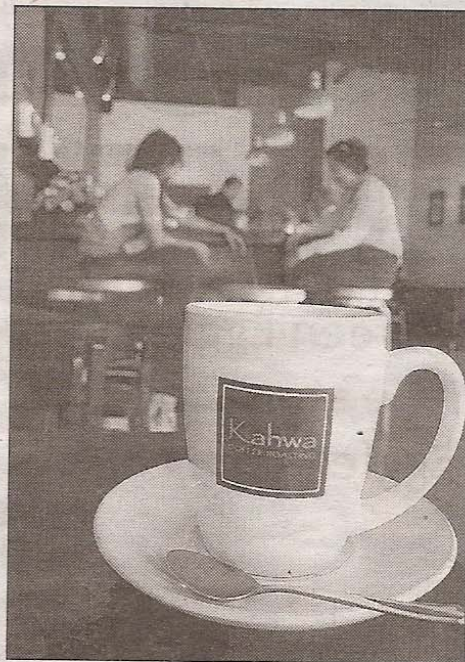
"I will never sell movies or music or sandwiches or espresso machines," he says. "It's only about coffee."

PIEROGI COME TO DUNEDIN

In June, artist **David Williams** and I did an Off the Eaten Path package on the Egyptian-themed Pierogi Grill on Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard in Clearwater. We received a great deal of reaction from readers who were excited about the Polish cuisine and amused by its mash-up with Middle Eastern decor.

Pat Kane-Prescott, one of the page designers who makes Flavor look so good, tells me that owner **Marek Pietryniak** has opened a second Pierogi Grill, this time in Dunedin.

The new restaurant is in a former Italian restaurant. And, true to form, Pietryniak has kept the existing decor and inserted his slate of *schabovy* (breaded pork cutlet with mushroom sauce), *golabki* (stuffed cabbage rolls), *golonko* (roasted pork shank) and *kiszka* (black barley Polish sausage).



Tribune photo by JEFF HOUCK

The new Kahwa Coffee is treating customers to free coffee today. Coffee was also free at Tuesday's grand opening.



Show up early for a seat at Jeff's online table at **tbo.com**, keyword **St**