



The Liberty Street location is the first of four planned by Beaner's franchisees Jeff Hauser and Leslie and Mark Mechigian.

A trio of new coffee shops

Beaner's, Bearclaw, and Akire enrich the mix

East Lansing's take on the coffee-house culture finally makes it to Ann Arbor with the November opening of **Beaner's Gourmet Coffee** on Liberty. Founded in 1995, Beaner's today has thirty-seven stores; with another twenty-two scheduled to open by the end of 2006. The Liberty store, which replaces American Spoon (see Closings, below), is the first of four locations franchisees Jeff Hauser and Mark and Leslie Mechigian hope to open in the area.

The secret of the company's success,

according to Hauser, is in the mellow coffee. "It's not as bitter and harsh as Starbucks, which sells West Coast coffee for a more mature coffee drinker," Hauser explains. "It's more middle of the road, more accessible." Beaner's "Best Blend" of Colombia and Tanzania peaberry beans can be brewed strong or light according to taste and is intended for people who've never had a cup of gourmet coffee before—and despite the ubiquity of Starbucks, there must be at least three or four of them out there. Beaner's also sells mocha java, French roast, a medium-dark blend the company calls Black and Tan, and Sumatra. Even the coffee drink descriptions are soothing and nonthreatening—like "Sugar Bear," a sweet-sounding combination of coffee, caramel, hazelnut syrup, and whipped cream.

Beaner's serves sandwiches—grilled on panini bread, on bagels, wrapped in flat bread—as well as chicken, Greek, and fruit salads; daily soups; yogurt; granola; and baked goods, including muffins, cake, cookies, chocolate-dipped shortbread, and brownies. There are also fruit smoothies made with whole fruit, juice, ice, and a vanilla-flavored milk base—and frozen versions of several of the coffee drinks, plus frozen chai, described as "a spicy mixture of black tea, honey, and blended spices."

Hauser says he and his partners think of themselves not as selling coffee but rather as providing an experience for their customers. In late August that experience was still in the planning stages, but it will probably include a cozy atmosphere and live entertainment, with open-mike nights.

Beaner's Gourmet Coffee, 539 East Liberty, phone unavailable at press time. Probable hours: Mon.–Thurs. 6:30 a.m.–midnight, Fri. & Sat. open 24 hours, Sun. open until 10 p.m.

Bearclaw Coffee Co. has a definite "up north" ring. But while the company name was actually inspired by a trip to Alaska, its drive-through cappuccino bar concept was imported from California, and its headquarters are in Dexter, Michigan.

Husband-and-wife entrepreneurs Doug and Debi Scroggins did a lot of traveling during the twenty years they worked for Northwest Airlines (she as a gate supervisor, he on the loading ramp). Self-admitted coffee junkies, they could hardly help noticing the proliferation of drive-through specialty coffee bars on the West Coast, an innovation they thought would work well in Michigan, too. So when Northwest offered them early-retirement packages, they jumped at the chance to

see if they were right. The couple launched their first drive-through location at the corner of North Territorial and Dexter-Pinckney roads in June 2002.

Business was good—so good that when a Chelsea family who own a small hotel in South Haven asked the Scrogginses about putting in an espresso machine, the couple turned it into an opportunity to open a coffee shop there. "Of course, after we opened the store, we needed someplace to stay when we were there, so we had to buy a boat," Debi laughs.

South Haven was followed by the company's first franchise, in the Irish Hills. This year they're adding a sit-down shop in downtown Dexter; a Chelsea drive-through on Old US-12; a combination coffeehouse and drive-through on Woodward in Detroit; a combo location in Brooklyn, Michigan, which opened just in time for Michigan International Speedway's NASCAR race; a store in Ypsilanti; and an Ann Arbor drive-through in the onetime Tuomy Hills gas station at Washtenaw and Stadium.

A native Ann Arborite, Debi considers landing the high-visibility Washtenaw location a coup. "Fifty-eight thousand cars drive past that spot a day, and believe me, the rent reflects that," she laughs. "We call it Hollywood and Vine."

The Scrogginses and their Ann Arbor franchisees, Don and Diane Wright, are gutting the interior of the space to transform it from the ATM it most recently was into a drive-through Bearclaw. When it opens this fall, it will be competing with Starbucks and Seattle's Best, both at Arborland, and a new Caribou Coffee, opening in the former Ponderosa location down the street from the shopping center. Debi, however, is pro-competition. "We have a very personalized customer experience," she explains. "If you come by my shop more than three or four times, we're going to know your name, we're going to know your drink, we're going to know your family, and that's the truth. I think Caribou will do just fine. And I think we'll be even better."

Bearclaw Coffee Co., 2460 Washtenaw, 358-6371. Probable hours: daily 4 a.m.–8:30 p.m.

When your last name is Grande, you endure a fair number of coffee jokes. But when your last name is Grande and you're actually in the coffee business, those jokes increase exponentially. "I don't mind," says Erika Grande, whose company, **Akire Coffee**, is opening its first coffeehouse on Packard, and whose last name is a synonym for a medium-size drink at Starbucks. "It's just how it is."

Akire is simply Erika spelled backwards, but Grande has been interested to hear the different ideas customers have

Bearclaw Coffee Co. has a definite "up north" ring. But while the company name was actually inspired by a trip to Alaska, its drive-through cappuccino bar concept was imported from California, and its headquarters are in Dexter, Michigan.