

a cup of community

Workers serve up friendliness,
philosophy and fair-trade coffee

by Katherine Fulton photo by Eric Wright



When you first walk in, the inviting aroma of coffee envelops you, and the calm, embracing atmosphere entices you to experience the world of Donkey. It does not take long to understand that Donkey Coffee and Espresso in Athens is more than just another coffee shop; it is a microcosm, a self-contained unit that promotes diversity, equality and social responsibility.

At the counter, you can order anything from tea to Italian soda, as well as delectable baked goods such as cookies and muffins. Donkey's coffee is fair trade, which ensures that the farmers who raised the beans are properly compensated. If you purchase a cup of coffee, you get free refills all day.

Inside the front entrance, you can check out upcoming events at the café, such as musical performances and poetry readings. Unique artwork by local artists completes the ambiance and incites discussion, while flyers and leaflets invite customers to join a cause. Stop AIDS, support debt relief for African nations, help political prisoners in countries worldwide, give blood, end war or aid the poor. The choice is up to you.

The philosophy behind Donkey originated with its owners, Chris and Angie Pyle. "He's been dreaming about something like this to bring people together for years," Angie says about her husband, Chris. She is a perky woman with an easy smile who greets a customer and his two small children, bending down to hug and talk with them. Soon after, Chris enters and is greeted warmly. Angie smiles, "He's the one you should talk to."

Chris' excitement and passion for his business is palpable. "Just the idea of community excites me," he says. This emphasis not only relates to the community at large but also extends to the individual customers.

"We realized that we always want to have an attitude of gratefulness when somebody walks in, like we did that first day," Chris says. "We're like, 'Wow, you've come to our store.'"

This attitude has paid off. The day's first customer arrives at 10:03 a.m., just three minutes after the store opens. By

10:43, patrons and Donkey regulars are settling in.

At a table in the café's spacious back room, Karen Chan, Bob Smiddie, Ron Luce and Laura Parrotti discuss their project: The Appalachian Regional Theater Company. They all agree that Donkey's intimate setting makes it a good place to conduct business. After a few hours of discussion, they depart, eager to meet each other again next month.

Chris and Angie's enthusiasm is aimed not only at the customers who come to Donkey but also at the employees who work there.

"This is a great place to work," says Misty Bowden, who has been an employee since July 2002, a month after Donkey opened. "Part of the goal of this place was to provide a haven for social activism and community-centered ideas." Misty and co-worker Jeff Rhodes wait on customers as if they are offering beverages to friends. In fact, they are on a first name basis with many of the regulars.

William Price is one of the regulars at Donkey, a patron "since day one." His loyalty stems from his enjoyment of Donkey's unique atmosphere. While studying in the evening, he says, "I think that the owners of Donkey have gone to great lengths to make this a place where you can both socialize and study."

As the day draws to an end, there is a last-minute rush for coffee and snacks. In an alcove filled with couches, a group plays Trivial Pursuit and argues about the answers. Closing time is near, but there is no hurry; no employees hover over patrons in an effort to shoo them out. Customers are welcome to stay as long as they wish. Eventually, they disappear, and just the employees and a few stragglers remain. They talk with each other about their plans for the evening, their problems and the high and low points of the past week. They may not be related, but here at Donkey they are family. And that is exactly how Chris and Angie want it to be. ☺

Donkey Coffee and Espresso is located at 17 1/2 West Washington Street. Hours are Weekdays: 7 a.m. to 1 a.m., Saturday: 10 a.m. to 1 a.m., Sunday: 12 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Ruth Gregory and Mark Benedetti relax at Donkey with a game of Scrabble

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