



The Useless Bay Cafe in Langley is a popular gathering spot serving breakfast and lunch, along with its signature coffee.

## Something's brewing on Whidbey Island

Four coffee companies promote their special roasts on the island and beyond

By Carolyn Tamler

**ONE THING IS** certain: It's easy to find a great cup of coffee on Whidbey Island.

Gary Smith is at the beginnings of Whidbey's coffee world. He established the Mukilteo Coffee brand in 1983, and gave Dan Ollis of Whidbey Island Coffee Co. and Mike Donahoe of Honeymoon Bay Coffee Co. their starts in the business. Des Rock, using Hines Public Market Coffee in Seattle as his model, became another artisan coffee roaster on the island with the creation of Useless Bay Coffee Co.

All of these coffee companies share common grounds: To purchase the finest coffee beans available and to roast them to perfection. All would agree the quality of their coffees match those of the finest roasters in the world. And all of the owners use the same word when describing their attitude toward their business: passion.

### MUKILTEO COFFEE, GARY AND BETH SMITH, OWNERS

Gary and Beth Smith are both Washington natives. Beth grew up in Ballard, Gary grew up in Edmonds and attended Edmonds Community College. In 1983, he was earning a living doing construction work, when one day he ordered a café latte at a Port Townsend coffee shop.

That was the beginning of his career. "I knew at the first sip that this is what I wanted to do in life," he says.

Smith began hanging around the shop and studying coffee, moved to Mukilteo, and started an espresso cart business at the ferry terminal. His future wife, Beth, sold him coffee beans from Stewart Brothers Coffee.

He built up enough clientele selling espresso to open a coffee shop and café in 1987 near the ferry terminal. In just two years, the business became so successful that he outgrew the location and decided to build a larger coffee shop up the hill from the terminal.

He acquired his first coffee roaster in 1989, and was trained by German roast master Peter Larsen. "Roasting became my passion," Gary said.

He was soon roasting 18 hours a day and realized he needed to upgrade to a bigger roaster. He kept moving to a higher level of business and had to get larger roasters to keep up.

By 2003, Gary and Beth, now married, made the decision to move Mukilteo Coffee Co. to a new warehouse and roasting facility across the water to a location in the woods near Langley. Their shop has now become a major tourist attraction, a venue for



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**Mike Donahoe, owner of Honeymoon Bay Coffee, invites visitors to see his roasting process and sample a number of different roasts at his Oak Harbor location.**

musical events and a highly appreciated café.

The Mukilteo Coffee Co. has 12 full-time employees and Smith says, “We’re like a family here.” He says the staff is excellent and that the company follows the highest roasting standards. Gary believes that Beth and Tim McCormack, both with 30 years experience (formerly of Stewart Brothers Coffee and Starbucks, respectively) are “the best espresso trainers in the world.”

Mukilteo Coffee is also a major wholesaler. They sell huge amounts of coffee in Asia, where their “Pacific Coffee” brand is highly regarded. Currently Mukilteo Coffee is sold throughout the United States, Canada and England, and the Pacific Coffee label sells well in Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai, Singapore and Tokyo.

On the Island, the Langley store has been remodeled to include a café, and Chef Jess Dowdell (formerly at Hedgebrook) was hired to run the café a year ago. The café serves breakfast and lunch regularly as well as dinners for special events. Dowdell is charged with buying as much from local, organic farmers as possible. By summer of next year, the Smiths plan to create a covered outside patio with heat lamps to provide additional space for retail customers.

Smith is also a musician with many connections to the musical community, and nationally known talent frequents “Beanaroya Hall” inside his coffee warehouse.

For the future, Smith is planning to focus on buying coffee direct from the organic farmers. He wants to build his business, becoming an importer and broker. And, he plans to continue playing guitar with other musicians whenever he can fit it in.

#### **WHIDBEY COFFEE CO., DAN OLLIS, OWNER**

Dan Ollis, founder of Whidbey Coffee, grew up on Whidbey Island. When he was ready to go to Edmonds Community College, he opened a small espresso stand in front of the Payless Grocery Store in Freeland to help pay for college. He purchased a Mukilteo Coffee cart from Gary Smith of Mukilteo Coffee Co., and set up the stand calling it “Whidbey Coffee.”

Instead of going on to a four-year college, he decided to create Whidbey Coffee Co. The company has been in business since 1989, and the 39-year-old entrepreneur loves what he does and never had a thought about going back for a degree.

Today, there are 11 Whidbey Coffee locations in the Puget Sound area, including three on South Whidbey,

two in Oak Harbor, one in Mukilteo, four in Skagit County and one in Anacortes. The two espresso stands in Oak Harbor were voted the best coffee on the island by loyal customers. The main office and the wholesale warehouse are in Freeland.

Freeland is also where Whidbey Coffee Co.’s Lighthouse Café is located, which is known for its coffee, soups, salads and sandwiches. Ollis also owns Victrola Coffee Roasters in Seattle, which has three retail outlets in the Seattle area. Whidbey Coffee makes its own blends and specializes in distributing a variety of Whidbey brand coffees to grocers throughout the region.

**“As the company grows, we intend to be on the cutting edge by serving great coffee that meets ever-higher standards.”**

**Dan Ollis,  
Whidbey Island Coffee Co.**

The company has 120 employees and Ollis prides himself on having Whidbey Coffee heavily invested in the communities where they are located. Whidbey Coffee Co. is proud to be the “official coffee” of the Everett Events Center and the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival. Whidbey Coffee is also involved in the community on South Whidbey with the Whidbey Island Share-a-Home fundraiser, “Readiness to learn” lunch boxes, the July 3 fireworks and the Island County Fair.

From the beginning Whidbey Coffee has been committed to cutting-edge practices in roasting and preparation. The acquisition of Victrola Coffee Co., with its history of the highest-quality, nationally reviewed, ethically sourced coffees and its fostering an environment that produces local and national barista champions, has helped bring the coffee’s preparation to new heights.

Ollis wants to see Whidbey Coffee grow and support the local communities. He adds: "As the company grows, we intend to be on the cutting edge by serving great coffee that meets ever-higher standards of production, preparation and presentation, and by creating neighborhood spaces where people come together."

### HONEYMOON BAY COFFEE, MIKE AND KATIE DONOHUE, OWNERS

Mike Donohue's family moved to the island, where his mother was raised, in 1988, the same year that Mike joined the Navy. At the end of his foreign service, he was given a choice of several locations for his home base. It was an easy decision to choose the Naval Air Station in Oak Harbor.

When he finished with his military service, he stayed on Whidbey Island where he met his wife, Katie. He worked as a farmer for a while and attended Skagit Valley College, and then worked at Nichols Brothers Ship Builders but still hadn't settled on a career. Katie met Gary Smith of Mukilteo Coffee, who mentioned he was looking for someone to hire whom he could train as a roaster.

Mike jumped at the opportunity: "I knew this would be a profession I would love because it combines mechanical skills with artistic ability." He settled in to his new job and became the director of roasting, and also handled most of the ordering and shipping.

Two years ago, Donohue decided he wanted to create his own business. He was able to purchase a vintage Probat roaster from Germany and began seeking out fine coffee beans from around the world under his label "Honeymoon Bay Coffee" (named for where his family lives on Whidbey Island). With his Navy experience, he was able to find a market for his product at several Navy exchanges. Soon, he was making contacts in many areas for his growing wholesale business. Today, 90 percent of his business is on the island and he sells Honeymoon Bay Coffee to many restaurants, groceries and other retail outlets.

His roasting facility offers a unique



Gary and Beth Smith of the Mukilteo Coffee Co. are at the heart of Whidbey's coffee scene.

tasting opportunity for visitors. His Oak Harbor location features a boutique coffee roastery, espresso bar and a tasting area where customers can sample six or seven different roasts. The bar also includes homemade pas-

tries. Half of the space is devoted to his roasting and bagging operation. So, a visitor can see the roasting process, sample coffees from around the world and have a latte and pastry in a single visit. As a small roaster, Donohue says,

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Des Rock roasts all the beans for Useless Bay Coffee.

"I have the time and experience to coax the best flavor out of every bean."

For the future, Donohoe plans to focus on building his wholesale business so that the Honeymoon Bay label will become more widely known, and with 26 varieties currently being roast-

ed, customers will have a large selection from which to make their purchases.

#### USELESS BAY COFFEE, DES ROCK, OWNER

Des Rock, a London native, had been living in Dallas for eight years when he discovered Whidbey Island on a family vacation. The visit to Whidbey convinced Rock that this was where he really wanted to live: "Where the forest meets the beach." Two months after the visit, Rock and his family moved into a rented house on Useless Bay.

Rock wanted to run a small business on Whidbey, and considered running a restaurant. He received a culinary arts degree from the Art Institute in Seattle, but he also had a young family and realized that a restaurant wouldn't give him the time he wanted to be with his two young children. "When the kids were young, I liked cooking dinner for them."

He did lots of research while working at the Harvest Vine and Café Juanita in the Seattle area and decided he wanted to become an artisan roaster. Three years ago, Rock found a broker online selling a 1950s coffee roaster made in Germany; he ordered the roaster set to restoring it. Next, he renovated a building in downtown Langley and started Useless Bay Coffee

Co. The roaster is expected to outlast Rock, and in the meantime he has developed the art of coffee roasting and is building his business as people call him to order the coffee they have enjoyed at his Langley café. He enjoys having a small shop "where you can almost touch the roaster while you are drinking your espresso."

Since opening, the building has been remodeled to provide additional space for more customer seating, and by the end of this year he plans to expand the kitchen and offer more extensive breakfast and lunch menus, and he may eventually begin serving dinner. He also plans to have a wine bar to compliment the casual dining experience.

Rock's success is built upon his skills as a roaster, his knowledge about how and where to purchase the finest coffee beans, and his personal ethic to buy as much fair trade coffee as possible and to use recycled or biodegradable materials as much as possible. The chaff (leftover coffee skins) from his roaster and the used coffee grounds are applied to the vegetable garden he created behind his store and in the landscaping surrounding Useless Bay Coffee.

During the slow seasons, he roasts three to four times a week, depending on demand. At Christmastime, in the summer and at other times when business ramps up, he roasts every day. Rock does all the roasting. He has 15 employees, many of whom are students and other part-time workers. By roasting frequently and selling the beans quickly, he assures his customers that their coffee purchase will always have the finest, freshest taste.

#### GREAT COFFEE SERVED HERE

It's safe to say that it's hard not to find an excellent cup of coffee or treat yourself to a great espresso drink just about anywhere on Whidbey Island. In addition to the four coffee companies, there are espresso shops and drive-thrus from one end to the other. But the owners of the four Whidbey Island coffee companies would agree that their coffees and espressos set the standard for excellence on the island. ■

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