

# Coffee shop serves cup of respect with natural brew

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*For the Journal*

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Eco-buzzwords like green, natural and organic are everywhere. Visit Terra Bella Organic Coffee and see those words come to life.

Organic and natural have a deeper meaning to Terra Bella owner Linda Vollertsen. Intertwined with concepts like free trade, respect and positivity, her business philosophy is clear: "If you have respect for yourself, the farmers, for the earth, for the customers, that's a really good foundation to build from and you always have that excellence."

Terra Bella, which means beautiful earth, started three and a half years ago as a way for Vollertsen, a stay-at-home mom and artist, to realize her passion for organic products and natural foods and to reach beyond work in an isolating jewelry studio. She now has three storefronts, and the latest of which opened this spring.

The opportunity came as a coffee cart for sale on Anchorage's Benson Boulevard. The coffee business is lucrative, as it is the second highest traded commodity in the world. Vollertsen looked at the cart a couple times and decided to go for it. It had to be 100 percent fair trade and organic, Vollertsen said. Eager to use chemical- and hormone-free products, "I wanted to go all the way. I had zero experience. I had never even worked in a restaurant."

Besides inexperience, Vollertsen faced another challenge: Where do you get organic products in Alaska?

Vollertsen eventually found a certified fair trade and organic coffee company K Bay Caffe, a roaster based in Homer that developed a secret three-bean "Bella" blend. The other challenge was to find organic milk. Unable to find it locally Vollertsen originally worked with Fred Meyer to get discounted cases of Organic Valley, from a co-op in the Midwest.

Terra Bella has grown steadily since its start in 2005, but not without growing pains. Start-up costs were about \$100,000 and so far all profits have gone into Terra Bella for expansion. A year after opening the Benson Boulevard drive-up coffee hut, Vollertsen and husband/business partner Rick Vollertsen decided to open a second site at the laser car wash near Merrill Field. Terra Bella was there one month when they learned the building was going to be demolished.

"It's just so expensive starting up new places. Even those little coffee carts, people don't realize how much goes into that," Vollertsen said. "To start up was probably about \$100,000. You look at those little coffee carts and you think, 'That's nothing!' Things are just so expensive with building and all

of that.”

The demolition put plans into motion to open Terra Bella Bakery and CafŽ: A sit-down coffee shop that had been requested again and again by customers. The new space in Midtown opened May 2007.

Business has grown by word of mouth with advertising here and there. At first Vollertsen thought her customer base was going to be a younger crowd, but has found that it's mostly women between 30 and 70 who provide the most business.

Besides offering organic coffee, tea, milk and syrups, Terra Bella also sold organic baked goods. Instead of hiring a caterer or baking goods offsite as Vollertsen had done in the past, the new location would have its own kitchen and bakers. She has three dedicated bakers who concoct treats such as gigantic soft cinnamon rolls, granola, breads, soups and sandwiches.

Not all the food is organic because Vollertsen says it's just too hard to get in Alaska. Instead, she does her best by shopping for organic where she can.

Terra Bella Bakery and CafŽ is more than tables and chairs; it also provides retail space for Terra Bella logo gear, a venue for artists to show and sell artworks, and for organic products such as soap, cocoa, honey and others.

“It's exciting to offer a space for fair trade and organic products,” Vollertsen said.

The coffee company also gives back to the community by donating coffee and goodie baskets to schools, nonprofit organizations, galleries and fundraisers. Terra Bella offers to display the monthly art show openings as part of First Fridays.

Vollertsen credits her success to a good bookkeeper, family support and her staff of 16 who all work toward the same values of customer services, integrity and quality products.

“I just have so many ideas for new products. I have to remind myself to go slowly,” she said. “Every year we have opened up a new location. I am hoping we can just sit now and build our profit base.”

As if Vollertsen is not busy enough with her business and jewelry making, she just opened a third location, a drive-thru at Jewel Lake Road and Dimond Boulevard.

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