

How Drive-Thru Coffee Saved Us from COVID-19

It's no secret the drive-thru coffee stand has been looked down on by the third-wave specialty coffee movement. Popular in the early 2000s, their punny business names, quintessential 20oz dark roast drip coffee, and the familiar lineup of syrup pumps were the picture of everything third-wave didn't want to be anymore. No more jokes or elaborate blender drinks with whipped cream on top; we wanted to be taken seriously for our slow-pour, single-origin, artisan brews.

Over the last decade, we specialty coffee drinkers developed an attitude about the inherent notes of our brown water that compelled us, almost morally so, to drive right past these quirky, convenient stands to a *real* coffee shop. One that undoubtedly charged us over three dollars for a 12oz cup of coffee, and took about three times longer to get, only having first taken more than three laps around the block looking for a parking spot, and spending another three minutes adding time on the city parking app. Yes, in the wake of developing a more refined coffee palate, we became paralyzed, and unable to notice on the side of the road the once appreciated drive-thru coffee stand of our high school yesteryears. That is, until COVID-19 force-closed our favorite neighborhood cafes and brought our enlightened caffeine-dependent needs to its knees.

Like many of us, I fell in love with the coffee culture as a young adult. It gave me a community to belong to and supported me all the way through grad school, which is why it was gut-wrenching to watch the pandemic force coffee shops to reduce hours, close down, and lay-off staff. I didn't envy the difficult choices they had to make. Had COVID-19 arrived one year earlier, I would have had to face questions about closing down my own bakery business and laying-off employees at two cafes, all while trying to figure out how to care for the wholesale producers connected to the shops I ran. I thought it was stressful opening a coffee shop, that's nothing in comparison to keeping it alive during a pandemic.

While quarantining this past March and April in the Northwest on Whidbey Island, I watched as these iconic Washington coffee stands came back to the forefront of our daily routine, bringing with it a sense of comfort and normalcy we no longer had in other parts of our lives. I was amazed to see long lines of cars weaving into intersections at every hour of the day. We needed this. Collectively, as a society trying to adjust to the shifting realities of day to day life, we wanted one thing to stay the same: our coffee. On top of that, we wanted to connect with somebody, anybody outside the home. The coffee shop used to be our "third place" — a space outside the home where we connected with a community that had shared interests and values. While we waited and supported the efforts of these businesses to re-open, the drive-thru stand was there to help ease the loss and keep us sane.

To better understand how the pandemic had influenced popular coffee companies with drive-thru models, I reached out to three leaders operating influential Washington businesses: Wes Herman, Founder and CEO of The Woods Coffee, Dan Ollis, CEO of Whidbey Coffee and Victrola, and Lauren Peagues, Store Manager of Starbucks in Tacoma, WA. The greatest takeaway from the conversations was a shared sympathy for small businesses and the coffee industry. No one could have anticipated this sudden change. With so much uncertainty in how to best move forward, they collectively expressed hope and belief the industry would pull through

together. Specific to their businesses they ran, both Wes and Lauren expressed a change in their customer's needs and buying attitudes. They shared how their customer's expressed a greater appreciation for their employees, grateful to have a way to connect and get their coffee, all while staying safe and healthy. Similarly, Lauren and Wes shared gratitude for how their staff had responded to ever-changing health guidelines and procedures. As leaders, they felt the emotional fatigue from either side of the pick-up window. It was one thing to manage profits and losses during quarantine, and a whole other thing to respond to the personal grief people came with each day. No one was expecting to lose loved ones, jobs, and school the way we have in the last couple of months. It is a burden we feel individually and as a whole.

While I'm excited to return to my favorite neighborhood coffee shop and have missed my elaborate single-origin pour-over, I am thankful for the drive-thru. The second-wave, third-wave divide, among many other things in life, has become silly and irrelevant. They both make great coffee, take care of us, and give us a place to belong outside our homes. What matters now, in our post-quarantine, pandemic influenced routines, is finding a moment of relief and joy in our everyday lives, and sometimes that might just mean getting a coffee with whipped cream on top.