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Local News

Gay group makes history (and icy drinks)

8/1/02

By [ERIC LEAKE](#)

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

If Fiesta-goers are doubled over with icy brain freeze for the first time, don't blame Charles Rice.

The director of Gay Santa Barbara Foundation double-blends the iced vanilla lattes at the Gay Cafe so they'll go down smoothly for the group's Fiesta debut.

"Everybody seems to like what we're doing," he said. "We're the only ones selling this product. It makes the 'caffiends' happy."

This year's Fiesta is the first for the foundation. Mr. Rice said the group feels as welcome as its drinks at the annual event.

"I think we made history here, we're the first gay anything at Fiesta," he said. "And it's well received, we're ripping here already. People want their iced mochas."

The Gay Cafe sits between the Apostolic Faith Tabernacle's "Homemade Fiesta Tamales" and San Nicolas Soccer Club's "Tacos Tijuana" at Mercado del Norte in MacKenzie Park. A large rainbow flag flies above and a side table with information about the local Gay Pride Festival stands out front.

Mr. Rice said he was not deterred by the festival's



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traditionalism.

"The only thought in the back of my mind was that Fiesta was very traditional, it had been going on for a long time, and being able to put a sign out there that says 'Gay Santa Barbara' I thought was a really important thing to do," he said. "So whatever questions we might have had before have certainly been answered."

Fiesta Spokesperson Kathy McKee said the mercados were created specifically for community groups such as Gay Santa Barbara, a 2-year-old nonprofit.

"Part of the reason for the mercado is to support community groups, so we're delighted that they wanted to participate," she said. "Fiesta is a wonderful time to celebrate the culture and traditions and history of Santa Barbara, and it's a wonderful time to involve all segments of the community."

Proceeds from the \$4 ice-blended vanilla lattes and \$2 coffees go toward the Gay Pride Festival, which is held in October.

And the booth allows people to put a face on the city's gay community.

"The outreach is the most important part of what we do, letting people know that the gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender community is an active, involved part of the community at large," Mr. Rice said.

Mr. Rice will spend his 50th birthday today celebrating with his teenage son and mixing drinks behind the counter in MacKenzie Park.

The recipe is simple: Take ice, add two parts mix to one part water, and serve with a smile.

"We try to have a little style when we do something here," Mr. Rice said.

The group's booth was the only one with a woven rug at the back door.

He trained fellow mocha-maker Jim Hall in the ways of chilled coffee.

Mr. Hall, 45, lost his job as a software engineer in September. He wanted to help the young organization, so he learned coffee-making skills from Mr. Rice.

The secret to a good blended coffee, he said, is getting the perfect mix, cleaning the blenders so the drinks taste fresh - and of course the ice.

"Neither Charlie or I or any of our other volunteers would be out here if it wasn't fun for us, if it wasn't important," Mr. Hall said.

Gay Santa Barbara's coffee booth is open every day through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., and could always use more volunteers.

Their Internet storefront is www.outinsb.org.

Caroline Nunez and her mother took Wednesday afternoon to enjoy an iced coffee on the Mercado del Norte lawn. She took her first sip and nodded in approval.

"I thought that I noticed it was new," she said Ms. Nunez, 50, a regular at Fiesta. "It's fine being here. They have every right to be here like anybody else."