

Flavor of the Week: **Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar**

By Jordan Barish



Courtesy Coco Espresso, Bar & Bistro

Located in the Glen Lennox community in Chapel Hill, Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar offers an entirely plant-based menu that doesn't compromise on taste or flavor.

Coco is an expansion of Coco Bean, a coffee shop and café that opened in Chapel Hill in 2016. Created by Tamara Lackey and her husband Steve Lackey, the reimagined Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar was done in collaboration with Grubb Properties who were looking for a local

partner focused on sustainability. The expanded restaurant opened in October 2021.

Although Coco Bean offered a few dairy options, Lackey decided that Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar would not compromise on its commitment to plant-based, sustainable food. “If we’re going to do this as eco-friendly as we can, in every single way, we can’t keep [providing dairy],” Lackey says. “So we kind of bit the bullet and went for it.”

Coco’s menu boasts breakfast, lunch and dinner selections, with an espresso bar during the day and both a bar and zero-proof — alcohol-free — bar for the evenings.

“Delicious, beautiful and thoughtful” are the three words Lackey uses to describe the food at Coco, with her personal favorite offerings being the pesto, chicken & arugula panini and the classic breakfast sandwich, all of which are plant-based.

Coco is focused not only on providing tasty, sustainable food to its patrons, but also an enjoyable dining experience. A wall of windows that opens to the outside dining patio allows for ample natural light in the restaurant. Music is curated for all times of day, with the morning, afternoon and evening playlists all working to amplify Coco’s ambience.

“We work a lot on the vibe. When people come in, the feel of it is very attractive. We spent a lot of focus on our lighting and the feel of the chairs, all of it,” says Lackey.

Because of the plant-based nature of Coco’s food, some items are outsourced, such as plant-based cheese from a creamery in San Francisco. But buying local is incredibly important to Coco. The restaurant works with Delight Foods in Morrisville, who provides plant-based chicken, Piedmont Microgreens and future-foods companies that are coming out of UNC.

“What we’re trying to do is a combination of bringing in really good foods that are clean and taste delicious, but also great locally-sourced foods.”

Coco also dedicates itself to making a positive impact in the community. The restaurant is partnered with nonprofit Beautiful Together, started by the Lackeys in 2014. The nonprofit is dedicated to improving the lives of children growing up in orphanages, group homes and foster care.

In 2020, the nonprofit launched the Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary, a three-acre refuge for animals in Chapel Hill, with 900 pets having been pulled out of shelters to date. Ten percent of Coco’s proceeds are donated to Beautiful Together, and the restaurant regularly hosts adoption events and fundraisers for the cause.

Looking to the future, Coco is planning on hosting more events and offering plant-based catering on a broader scale. The restaurant also puts on open-mic nights and wine-tastings and is hoping to expand these events.

If you want food that is both delicious and eco-friendly, Coco Espresso, Bistro & Bar is located at 101 Glen Lennox Drive Suite 180 in Chapel Hill.