

JAVA DREAMS

From the modest beginnings of a 300-square-foot space with no air conditioning, to a luxurious café showcasing dazzling décor, Laurie Behr has made her dreams a reality, opening a beachside coffee shop with a Polynesian flair

Story by Shawn Green

Ho'omaika'i means "congratulations" in Hawaiian, and that sentiment, spoken in any language, is what Java Surf Café owner Laurie Behr certainly deserves. Behr recently moved her Indian Ocean business to the former home of beach icon Shagg's Surf Shop. While the move itself was only a matter of feet from her previous location adjacent to a nearby bait shop, the road to get there was 12 years in the making. "I've been trying to get in this place (Shagg's) for years," she says. "My knuckles are bloody from knocking on the door." In 1994, after an eight-year career in the Air Force in which she retired as a captain, Behr relocated to Brevard County from Seattle. She says she dropped out of school, where she was working on her master's degree in physical therapy, and came to the Sunshine State with a dream of opening a small café.

After arriving in Brevard, Behr sold shaved ice from a small stand in front of a beachside Wal-Mart. Over the years, she saved and expanded her digs to a more concrete space. For more than a decade, she ran her coffee shop in a 300-square-foot space with no air conditioning. Now, at age 40, her vision has come to fruition. Her new shop's carefully chosen décor helps to tell her story.

By enlisting the assistance of designer Trish Poole, president of Design Poole, Inc. in Melbourne, and the mosaic mavens of William Wayne Interiors in Indian Harbour Beach, Behr has transformed the former surf shop into a cozy café with a Polynesian flair. Choosing items that clients love and a décor they feel comfortable with is a key factor in the design process, Poole says. "I think it's important that the space pulled in her personality. We try to find out what a client's personal interests are. It's about the beach and coffee," Poole says. That "beach-coffee" theme is exactly where Poole drew her color palette from, using hues of greens, blues and rich chocolate browns to create an elegant, yet comfortable space for customers to kick back and relax. Behr's love of the beach is depicted through two, large scale mosaics depicting cresting waves that look like they were gathered from a surfer's dreams. One surrounds the store's fireplace and is 12 feet tall by 9 feet wide. The other blankets the 40-foot-wide wall behind the service counter, peaking at 15 feet tall.

The mosaics, which can be viewed from State Road A1A through a plate-glass window, add the "wow-factor" appreciated by patrons as well as designers. "You don't have long to make that first impression," Poole says. And what an impression the tiled walls make. William Jurgens of William Wayne Interiors says he and his partner, Bryon Gardner, used 40 different types of tiles and other materials in a medley of cobalts, turquoises and navies to create the magnificent seascape. The pair worked without the guidance of a pattern, a feat that drew several spectators and questions during the five weeks it took to complete the job. Jurgens says they are able to design mosaic artwork in the same fashion that painters create their interpretations with brush strokes. The result of the pair's work is nothing less than breathtaking. Italian iridescent tile and natural sea glass help to give the two murals a depth and dimension that mimics light bouncing from foamy waves.

"We pooled sources from all over the world," Jurgens says. When choosing accessories for the space, Poole says she made sure to include items celebrating the Hawaiian culture — a favorite vacation spot of Behr's — in her design plan. From the two, nearly roof-top-high tikis standing on either side of the shop's entrance, to the smaller idols standing guard over the cream sugar station, touches of the Polynesian lifestyle are prevalent throughout the café. These fun elements serve to make Behr feel right at home in her place of business. "I spend so much time here I wanted it to be a place that I'm comfortable," she says. But as much as Behr wants her new space to be beautiful for herself, she also wants it to be a vision for her customers.

At the shop's former location, the restaurateur admits her patrons were loyal to her coffee and other treats, despite rickety, old tables and an ever present wafting aroma from a bait and tackle shop next door. Now, her clientele may sip their java and munch on homemade pastries while sitting on cozy couches and chairs either in front of the fireplace or at tables while enjoying the view outside.

The earthy design style, which includes matchstick blinds and slate flooring, helps to make the place more inviting and unassuming without sacrificing elegance. "It's very grounded," Behr says. "I didn't want high-end. I wanted to make people feel at home." Designing the space to make her customers feel at home was a gesture of thanks on Behr's part, but also a smart business choice, according to Poole.

Poole, whose company's client base is largely comprised of major resorts and hotels, says a good deal of her design style is dictated by who lives and visits the area in which a commercial space is located. "You have to understand your demographic and venue," Poole says.

After many years serving in the same location, it's likely that Behr was well aware of her customers' desires, and now she is able to see them enjoying her delectable offerings surrounded by aesthetics stemming from her loves. "My heart is finally complete," she says.