

Nebraska Geographic

with ALAN J. BARTELS

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Anytime is a Good Time for Coffee (part 1)

Continuing with my last *Nebraska Geographic* column's culinary theme, this time around I am spouting off about coffee shops. The days are starting to cool, a little, so why not write about America's and Nebraska's favorite hot beverage?

In my many years as a freelance writer and photographer, and in my time as a traveling magazine editor, I think I bought coffee from nearly every gas station, restaurant, grocery store, and convenience store in Nebraska. To this day I even get a steaming cup of coffee from the Double T Bar in Halsey if I am passing by in the morning. Reta's blend of coffee and conversation has fueled many of my Sandhills adventures. And when returning home late in the night from points far to the west, I am sure that the coffee from Sandhills Oil in Thedford has more than once helped me stay safely awake until I got home. Thank you, Mr. Jameson.

For what it is worth, I have never ended up with cold, or even lukewarm coffee from Caseys. Other convenience store chains, in my opinion and based on my experience, can be hit and miss. With that said, when possible and when time permits, I do like to seek out unique coffee shops – especially if I am near one that I have never been to before.

Downtown Coffee Company is on the corner of Third Street and Norfolk Avenue in the beating heart of vibrant downtown Norfolk. In many ways this place is a feast of the senses: cool tunes playing low on the radio, a satisfying diversity of pleasing scents and warm aromas, interesting art and décor on the walls, comfortable seating in its varied layout, and of course, coffee!

The drink menu includes hot and iced Breve (I don't know what that is), hot or iced lattes (they always have to remind me what that is), Café au Lait, Steamers, and much more. Black coffee with a small squirt of hazelnut syrup is my go-to, but the baristas here know my tastes and often suggest something they are sure that I will like – they have never steered me wrong. Of course there is tea, smoothies, and many other drinks. People look at me weirdly when I photograph the baked goods at Downtown Coffee Company but trust me when I tell you that they are beautiful, and taste even better than they look. They also go great with coffee. 302 W. Norfolk Ave., Norfolk. (402) 844-3699.

My next recommendation is one that I have not actually been to – or have I? As of 2024, Embers Bakery & Café is new to McCook. But from 1957 to 2024, the same building on Norris Avenue in downtown McCook housed the renowned Sehnert's Bakery and Bieroc Café. When owned by Matt and Shelly Sehnert, Sehnert's Bakery was awarded one of only five James Beard America's Classic Awards presented in the United States in 2019 – and to this day – the only one ever awarded in Nebraska.

The award was, um, awarded, for the food item in the business name, the bieroc – seasoned ground beef and cabbage or kraut wrapped in Sehnert's delicious bun dough and then baked. Sometimes compared to a runza, appreciating a bieroc includes taking in the aroma while devouring every last crumb.

Ownership changed in 2021, and the name change took place in August 2024. The new owners, Andrew and Alix Ambriz and their sons Isaiaha and Zander, are continuing the Sehnert family's long commitment to quality culinary offerings and community service. Breakfast is available from 7 a.m. until it is gone. In my experience there are always donuts and other baked yummys calling to me through the glass display cases. And oh, this column is about coffee shops, right?

Embers offers a variety of tea, coffee, espresso, smoothies and more. This fall they'll open a drive-thru at the former Daylight Donuts location in McCook, and next year Embers will open a location in Kearney.

312 Norris Ave., McCook. (308) 345-6500.

Check out the October 2 edition of *The Ord Quiz* for part 2 of the *Nebraska Geographic* spotlight on Nebraska coffee shops.

Safe travels – and watch for deer!