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GROUNDS FOR INCLUSIVITY

7 Queer Coffee Shops That Serve up Community and Pride

by **Rebecca L. Rhoades**

It's a typical Wednesday night in Tempe, Arizona. In a nondescript strip mall, long after most of the stores have closed for the evening, a crowd assembles outside the brightly lit windows of a small coffee shop. Groups of young men huddle and laugh joyously. To one side, partially obscured by a large stucco pillar, two women nestle closely, sharing an intimate gaze while sipping from paper to-go cups. Inside, an episode of *The Golden Girls* flickers on a giant TV screen.

The gathering is the weekly queer meetup at **Brick Road Coffee**, one of a rapidly growing number of LGBTQ+-owned and -embraced coffee shops across the nation.

"We're a space that's visibly queer, and visibly supportive of our community," co-owner Gabe Hagen says. "Oh, and by the way, we sell coffee."

Historically, coffee houses have always been more than simply somewhere to grab a quick caffeine fix. Often coined "third spaces," neutral spots between home (the first place) and work (the second place) where people can gather and interact in a welcoming, relaxed environment, they were recognized as destinations where like-minded people could meet. And in their earliest years, where queer people, specifically gay men, could connect, socially and romantically.

During the Ottoman Empire, coffeehouses were notorious locales for male-male sexual liaisons as well as political dissidence. In 18th century England, gay men would meet for companionship and sex at certain coffee shops and cafes. Termed "molly houses," the establishments frequently were raided, and their customers arrested.

By the mid-20th century and into the early 2000s, bars and nightclubs took over as the main hubs for queer culture. Dedicated gay, lesbian, and trans bars became staples of socializing as well as activism.

"The nightclub scene has done an amazing job of helping the queer

community realize the power of being together for the longest time, but there are limits to that," Hagen explains. "The coffee shop atmosphere is one that's intentionally designed around bringing people together to sit and gather."

For this issue of *PASSPORT*, I've rounded up seven queer coffee shops that are serving up more than lattes and cold brews. They're providing support, finding ways to fight hate, and fostering inclusivity and connection.

BRICK ROAD COFFEE

Tempe, Arizona

When Hagen and his husband, Jesse Shank, opened "The Queerest Coffee Shop in the Valley" in 2021, they knew they wanted it to be a space that welcomed the local LGBTQ+ community.

"Our name, which is a callback to queer history that usually flies under the radar of most people, was meant to be a subtle welcome to our community," Hagen explains, adding that at first, the shop's identity was subtle: a rainbow window cling; rainbow-hued doves painted on a wall. But when the couple added a wish tree for Phoenix-based LGBTQ+ youth support nonprofit one-in-ten, customers took notice.

"That was the opening of the floodgates of rainbows," Hagen adds. Folks brought in books, knickknacks, flags, and other decor, filling every wall and shelf. "Our customers reaffirmed to us that they wanted a space that is visibly queer, visibly supportive."

Brick Road has since grown to be one of the most active and outspoken queer coffeehouses in the country. The shop has welcomed political campaigns, fundraisers, HIV/STI testing, blood drives, bi book clubs, and lesbian game nights, just to name a few. Its Wednesday meetup, called Grounds for Connection, was so popular that it launched a Friday



Jesse Shank and Gabe Hagen at Brick Road Coffee

Photo courtesy of Brick Road Coffee

Sarah Brown at Lussi Brown



Photo: Amber Lawrence

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spin-off, Trans Together, for the trans and gender-expansive community.

It's hosted celebrities, such as Ted Danson and Jennifer Garner; politicians, including Senators Amy Klobuchar and Mark Kelly; and civil rights advocates. Hagen has also appeared on local and national news programs, speaking about everything from LGBTQ+ rights to the effects of tariffs on small businesses.

Hagen notes that while Tempe and Phoenix trend toward progressive, Arizona remains a conservative state. In February 2023, Brick Road received a bomb threat during a scheduled Drag Story Hour. Right-wing groups, including the Proud Boys and Turning Point, which is headquartered in Phoenix, have protested events at the shop.

"We've had our personal information doxed, and there have been blog posts that say the most atrocious things about me and my husband and our business," Hagen says. "But our community is really strong in how we pull together and create this weird, beautiful safety net.

"Looking back through history, there's a reason why they always try to target the LGBTQ community," he continues. "They try to put us into a space of fear, one where we kind of go back into the closet and hide ourselves. But our power comes from relying on each other and realizing that, like our authenticity and our community, there's strength in that. And I think that's what spaces like Brick Road and other coffee shops do." 4415 South Rural Rd, Suite 10, Tempe, AZ. Tel. 480-590-7246. brickroadcc.com

TOTALLY TEA

Concord, New Hampshire

Just months after Drag Story Hour was threatened at Brick Road Coffee, Emmett Soldati's Totally Tea cafe made national headlines after members of a neo-Nazi hate group showed up to protest their Drag Story Hour, banging on the shop windows and terrorizing customers.

"It's sort of an unfortunate trend that some places are dealing with in the last decade," Soldati says. "People think we're a target, and they try to intimidate and harass us, but they've been unsuccessful. I belong here. My cafe belongs here. And I'm not going anywhere, so you'd better get used to it."

Soldati opened his distinctive pink cafe, then called Teatotaler, 15 years ago when he was just 23 years old. Newly sober, he wanted a space where folks of all ages could gather.

"I was born in the 80s, and as a young queer person back then, there was no sense of accessing your community under the age of 21 unless you had a fake ID," he explains. "There was a very explicit message to young people that queer identity was tied to the consumption of alcohol."

As Totally Tea grew and expanded, so did its queer identity. The more Soldati doubled down on his values, the more business increased. Day-time drag brunches and story hours, queer meetups, and speed dating help draw in crowds. One Yelp reviewer called the cafe a "queer hipster oasis." The nickname stuck.



Photo courtesy of grindhrs

“I can’t count how many emails I have from parents who say we saved their kids’ lives,” Soldati continues. “Whether it’s a young person who’s exploring or discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity, or someone who just needs a place to sit with painted nails, being told you’re cool, you’re good, you’re welcome to be here has such an impact.” 2 Capital Plaza, Concord NH. Tel. 603-457-2080. [totally.cafe](#)

LUSSI BROWN COFFEE BAR *Lexington, Kentucky*

Sarah Brown found her community while working at a coffee shop during college in the small Appalachian town of Berea, Kentucky. “The owner was very out and queer, and he helped me come out of the closet,” she recalls. “It became a very safe space for me.”

In 2017, she joined forces with Olivia Lussi to open their own business in Lexington. Brown later took over and now runs it on her own. “When we opened, we had a lot of queer staff, and we were right next to the offices of the Lexington Pride Festival, so we kind of organically became a queer space,” she says. Pride flags—lesbian, queer, bisexual, transgender—line the front windows.

“But it’s more than a flag that makes coffee shops queer,” Brown says. “If you want to be successful, you have to support your staff. These are the people who make things happen, so I want them to feel comfortable, even in a conservative place like Kentucky. I have to be intentional about creating a safe space for everyone.”

The shop hosts a variety of events, including queer book clubs, performances by a local queer burlesque troupe, and a monthly sapphic meetup, the only one in the state, called Lex Lez Night. Local artists, sapphic-owned food vendors, and nonprofits frequently set up pop-up shops

on-site. “And not to brag too much, but we’re one of the best coffees that you’re going to get in town, whether you’re gay or straight,” Brown says. “And I think that has a lot to do with our success.” 114 Church Street. Lexington, KY. Tel. 859.469-8440. [lussibrowncoffee.com](#)

AZALEA COFFEE BAR *Columbia, South Carolina*

“In South Carolina, and probably a lot of similar states, coffee is very associated with religion,” Brittany Koester says. “A lot of the shops are faith-based, and the majority are owned by guys who went to a local religious college. That’s where we come in.”

When Koester opened her coffee bar five years ago, her initial focus was to fight the gender inequalities in the business, sourcing her beans and teas from women farmers and supporting women’s causes in the local community.

“But as a person who’s married to a woman, it’s important for me to be open about my life and my family,” she says. “I guess I didn’t realize how important being an out business owner really would be or how much our city, our community, was lacking that representation.”

Today, she continues to champion local women’s issues, including partnering with Planned Parenthood to distribute free Plan B emergency contraceptives at Azalea. She also promotes the queer community. Azalea regularly hosts “Little Gay Markets.” These community events feature a mix of queer- and ally-owned businesses, including artisans, food vendors, and entertainment. Koester has also raised funds for local organizations such as the Harriet Hancock Center, an LGBTQ+ resource and community center, and she’s even donated coffee to those in need.

“I get all sorts of messages from people saying how nice it is that we exist and how they feel so comfortable in our shop,” she adds. “I didn’t intend to create this kind of space, but it’s my life, too. I think if you’re open and honest about yourself, people respect that, and they want to support you.” 2700 Devine St., Columbia, SC. Tel. 803-851-0694. [azaleacoffeebar.com](#)

GRINDHRS COFFEE & COMMUNITY *Toledo, Ohio*

Becca Ferstle always dreamed of running a bed-and-breakfast, but her wife, Leann Cantrell, convinced her to open a coffee shop instead—specifically, a queer coffee shop.

“Leann was the one who had the idea. She saw that we had quite a few gay bars, but no other spaces,” Ferstle says. Cantrell notes, “I think the culture around sobriety has shifted a lot. People are wanting to have a third place that’s not centered around alcohol.”

The couple opened GrindhRS in early 2021 and every element of the business is carefully thought out to fit the queer theme. Beans are sourced from Uncommon Coffee Roaster, a queer-founded and -owned roaster in Saugatuck, Michigan. Drinks have Drag Race-worthy names such as “Yass Queen,” “Sugar Daddy,” “My Kink is Koffee,” and “You Betta Werk.” And Pride flags flutter in the windows. The shop quickly gained a loyal following. It was recognized by the mayor of Toledo for being an inclusive space, and in 2024, it was voted the best LGBTQ+ business in the city by *Toledo City Paper*.

“We’ve had people come out at the shop. We’ve had people get married in our shop,” Ferstle says. “We’ve had a lot of people approach us and thank us for opening the space and tell us how much it was needed. That’s always really validating. The whole point of opening GrindhRS was to pro-

vide a space for people to feel comfortable, where they can be themselves.”

The success of Grindhrrs has allowed the couple to lean into supporting organizations and causes in which they believe. They’ve collected food for Equality Toledo, a nonprofit that works to eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. They’ve held fundraisers for gay city officials and partnered with the local Stonewall Democrats on letter-writing campaigns. They’ve opened their space to Equality Ohio for petition collections, and they showcase performances by a local theater company.

But their biggest joy comes from meeting their customers every morning. “It’s fun to be part of people’s morning routine,” Ferstle says with a laugh. “They get a smile and a gay coffee, and you know they’re happy.”
625 Adams St, Toledo, OH. Tel. 419-214-0168. grindhrrs.com

2 QUEENS COFFEE Narrowsburg, New York

About six months after Martin Higgins and his husband, Charles Wilkin, opened their roastery and cafe in the tiny weekend-getaway hamlet in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains in 2019, a young woman and her mother came in and ordered tea served on china hand-painted by Wilkin’s grandmother. As the two took their seats, “it became apparent really quickly that the young woman was coming out to her mother. So we went and hid in the back room and gave them their privacy so they could have their moment,” Higgins says. “That’s what this is about. That’s what I want this to be. Offering a safe space, a very queer-forward, queer-friendly space, is just something we felt compelled to do.”

Narrowsburg welcomes a large number of queer vacationers from New York City and Philadelphia. Many of those visitors, Higgins and Wilkin included, then decide to remain, either retiring or relocating from the big city and starting their own businesses. Of the 22 storefronts on Main Street, which runs along the banks of the Delaware River, six are queer-owned and -operated. But with a year-round population of fewer than 400, Narrowsburg is just a tiny blue dot in a predominately red county.

Narrowsburg has attracted such notable queer figures as Aaron Hicklin, former editor-in-chief of *Out* magazine, and award-winning playwright C. Julian Jiménez. On the other hand, it’s also home to the family of infamous J-Sixer Jacob Lang.

Higgins recalls one couple who were house hunting in the area. “Lang’s dad had put up this crazy pro-Trump billboard, so when these two young men came to look one said, ‘I don’t think this place is very welcoming,’” Higgins recalls. “Then the husband found our shop and was like, ‘If these two guys can put up a sign over their door that says “2 Queens,” and it’s not a problem, I think we can live here.

“They’ve been here for five years now, and every time we see them, they tell us that we’re part of the reason why they chose this town,” he continues. “There’s a lot of people who choose to be here because they like it, but as a queer person they feel as though they can’t be super out and proud. But when they’re in our cafe, they can be their true authentic selves and not feel threatened, and that’s so important. When customers thank us for being here, it makes us realize that we’re doing something bigger than ourselves. 90 Main St. Narrowsburg, NY. Tel. 845-252-5300.
2queens.coffee

ROOSTER CAFE Missoula, Montana

Like many gay men, Bruizer Graybill battled addiction, which led to

incarceration at a young age. After his release, he decided to go back to school to become a pastry chef. That’s where the idea for opening a coffee shop and bakery took shape.

Together with his husband, Bolt, Graybill opened Bolt & Bruizer’s Bakery and Barkery, offering up fresh baked goods for people and their pets. Following the death of their nephew, whose nickname was Rooster, the couple decided to honor him by opening a coffee shop in his name. The two businesses reside in a single building.

“Our goal wasn’t to become a queer space,” Graybill recalls. But a local newspaper found an article written about him while he was in college that talked about his past and his struggles. “So they wrote another article about me: Look at this queer who’s a felon, an addict, an alcoholic, trying to open this bakery. I had a choice at that moment. I could either run from it, or I could embrace it.

According to Bolt, once the shop was identified as a gay bakery, things took off. “We embraced that moment, and we ran with it,” he says. “Everyone is welcome: gays, lesbians, transgender. We open our doors to make sure everyone is heard and seen and knows that they’re loved.”

A big part of that love comes from partnering with local organizations that focus not only on the queer community but also on prison reentry, addiction recovery, autism, and more. The Graybills have held holiday parties at their bakery, they provide jobs for former felons and addicts, and they donate to Missoula Pride and Queer Prom.

Rooster Cafe also is the only safe pup play space in Montana. “We’ve changed so many lives because of that,” Bruizer says. “People who are pups are able to come here and be themselves. They’re able to live their true lives.” 1300 S Reserve St. Suite A. Tel. 406-241-3997. Missoula, MT.
boltandbruizers.com/pages/rooster-cafe



Photos courtesy of 2 Queens