

# Leaps of Faith: Tales of Newer Local Businesses



**Melissa  
Bryant of  
Organic Bliss**

By Mary Runser  
Photos by John Fredericks

From major corporations to small businesses, business owners all over the state have been downsizing, reorganizing, and out-and-out closing their doors in the last several years. And yet, as the economy in Michigan has steadily declined over those years, there are still brave souls who have taken the leap of faith to open their own businesses here. The following are profiles of two local business owners who have left their — more mainstream — jobs, not because they were forced out, but because it was time to pursue their dreams. They tell us how they've been faring in this economy, and you'll see that it took courage for each of them to make the leap. And perhaps you will be reminded, as I was, that there is still opportunity in this country that we should not discount. As one business owner said, "There are still reasons why people want to come here, and those reasons are worth not getting apathetic about." I couldn't have said it better myself.

## Organic Bliss

### Melissa Bryant, owner

After spending 15 years in the mortgage lending industry, Melissa Bryant was ready for a change. She liked the industry well enough, but didn't like the fact that it was "just a job." "I realized I didn't want to live with the idea that I lived for the weekend," Melissa says. She liked the job in general and the travel that went along with it, "but it just wasn't fulfilling on a deeper level."

Melissa had already begun making lifestyle changes by beginning a yoga practice and eating healthier foods. She and her husband, Jason, also began "greening up" their home by using cleaning products that were safer for the environment, and they became interested in sustainability. These changes, made over the course of five years, are really what drove Melissa to make a change in her career.

With no experience in retail, Melissa still decided she wanted to establish a boutique that offered natural and organic body care, baby care, and lifestyle products. In June of 2008, she opened Organic Bliss in downtown Ann Arbor. Inside the boutique you will find "a range of carefully selected organic products that will help you maintain a healthy, balanced, and eco-friendly lifestyle."

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goes into a product before it finds a home in the store. I really search for high-quality, pure products that promote a healthy body and mind, and preserve our environment through sustainable farming methods and eco-friendly packaging."

Inside Organic Bliss, you'll find natural, pure organic items ranging from aromatherapy, body care, hair care, baby care, cosmetics, and fragrances to books, clothing, accessories, and yoga supplies. You don't have to research the quality or purity of anything you might want to purchase, because that work has already been done for you. Melissa's goal is to provide products which are safe for the consumer. Also, she makes sure that ingredients that go into the products she sells are grown with sustainable farming methods in mind and that the packaging is as eco-friendly as possible, in order to save our resources and preserve the planet.

Melissa admits that retail is a risky venture in any economy, because you're never really sure what people will buy. This is especially true for the local, independent retailer. She has had to make changes to her business plan because of things she's learned along the way. The good part about that is that the business is growing, slowly but steadily, and she has built a really good customer base. "I never realized that [organic] skin care, cosmetic care, and baby care products would be as popular as they are, when I first started out." Melissa said. "And I didn't know they were particularly popular as gifts, as I've found them to be."

Organic Bliss is a direct reflection of the lifestyle changes Melissa and her husband began making several years ago. Has she found the fulfillment that her previous career lacked? "Yes," Melissa said. "Still, it's been a huge lifestyle adjustment, because it's a 24/7 thing. Even when I'm out of the store, I'm always thinking about it. But, I can definitely say I'm no longer searching."

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# beezy's coffee & café: simple, honest food

Bee Mayhew, owner



Bee Mayhew of *beezy's coffee & café*

Bee Mayhew opened her restaurant in November of 2008 with the idea of providing her guests with simple, honest food. "My vision really was to find that space between the idea that everything must be purchased locally, and the ability to provide good food made from pronounceable ingredients in a budget range that almost anyone can afford. The state of the economy when I opened was as bad as it was going to get, so to be able to provide a plate that included free-range chicken and eggs, while spending a little less on my deli meat in order to provide good food in a price range of five to ten dollars a plate, was quite a feat."

Even in finding that space, Bee still does her best to buy locally by using produce vendors like Frog Holler and by using the Ypsilanti Food Co-Op. Even when she has to use her "big box" supplier, she uses Gordon Food Service, because it is a Michigan-based business. "I feel that people need to use their voices with these bigger suppliers that already have the food lines established, to make them better. Ask them to better advertise their Michigan-grown and -produced items, so that you can purchase them. Everything I do here is about balancing resources so that it all works. Compromising commitment doesn't always have to be a negative thing."

The tight quarters and open kitchen of beezy's creates an atmosphere that invites everyone to become involved with what's going on. It's a little more laid-back, a little goofy, and a little less pretentious than the usual dining experience. This makes it easy for a visitor to feel comfortable enough to comment on the experience. "And that involvement, I think, is essential to my business," Bee said. So I asked her what she means by "simple, honest food." "It's food you could make at home but don't have to," Bee answered. "It's food like your mom or your grandma used to make. It's things made from scratch and things made with sass."

Bee has traveled widely throughout the country and has been in both Mexico and Canada. Actually, she was born in Canada. She and her siblings were raised on their mother's bartending salary and moved frequently, to go where the money took them. By the time she was 12 years old, she was unofficially helping out in the restaurants where her mother tended bar. At 16, she got her first job, at a restaurant in Petoskey, and worked there in fits and starts for nearly 10 years, learning all the positions and eventually becoming the general manager. She came to Ann Arbor to work with Zingerman's before opening her own restaurant.

With that background, Bee should have run as far from the food industry as possible, but as she says, "food service and the service industry in general is a noble profession, and I just feel that this is where I'm supposed to be." So, for the first time in her life, Bee is putting down some roots in Ypsilanti. And it is that — putting down roots — which she considers her "deepest act of rebellion." She's become more of a homebody, which allows her to "create my own idea of what I want my family to be." And, of course, beezy's has become a natural part of her family.

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