

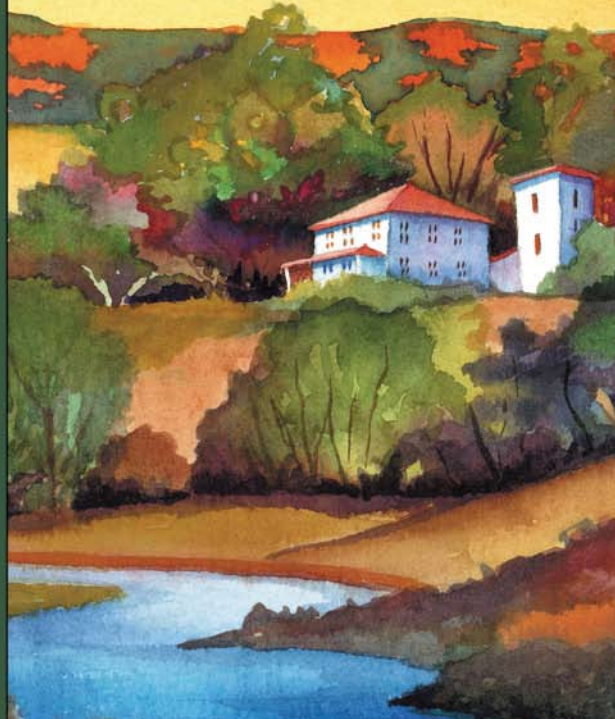
# THE MONTHLY

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## DRINK

A coffee-fueled capital campaign it may be, but Oakland's community-centered **Awaken Cafe** at 414 14th St. is once again banking on its customers' caffeine addiction to help the cafe realize its dreams, this time for a planned expansion in early 2010. Before opening in 2008, the owners of the espresso bar and art gallery, which positions itself as a green, sustainable, socially conscious community meeting spot, wooed investors and backers to help the cafe get off the ground. Cort Dunlap, the cafe's nattily attired owner and general manager, dreamed up a unique twist to the standard investment model. With his partner Larry Biggie, Dunlap convinced backers to pre-purchase a \$200 to \$1,000 stake in Awaken's lattes, cappuccinos, and teas, in exchange for guaranteed caffeination and a 10 to 20 percent discount on future coffee drinks. That plan gave Dunlap and Biggie a ready supply of cash to help them through their first critical year in business.

"It does not have the advantages of investing in Starbucks," says Dunlap. "You will not get your money tripled. What you will get is a place in your community that you like. People want a place where they are known, like in 'Cheers,' and we appreciate their vote of confidence in us."

Now Awaken is looking to complete its next building phase—a 3,500-square-foot expansion that will include a coffee-and-tea house, an organic eatery, a meeting place, community center, larger art gallery, and an after-dark beer-and-wine bar and live performance space. To make this happen, Awaken is once again turning to its biggest fans, the loyal clientele who frequent the neighborhood cafe. Last year, Awaken raised some \$22,000 this way, including \$1,000 of Biggie's own money, he says. It was the unusual investment strategy, in fact, that got Biggie's attention. He's now the cafe's business manager and a co-owner.

Dunlap says the prepaid strategy has now raised another \$23,000, bringing the total to \$45,000—and that's just counting the cash. Prepaid accounts have also been bartered for graphic design, designing retail shelving, public relations help, hanging art shows, and legal advice. Out of nine current investors, two additional patrons have joined Dunlap and Biggie as owner/investors; two have shown artwork in the cafe; and one offered consulting advice on raising capital as a green business.

"People said, 'I want this business that is not here yet,'" says Biggie, adding that Awaken is all about "creating and sustaining" businesses in Oakland that customers want to patronize.

While unorthodox, Dunlap and Biggie's caffeine-driven fundraising model is a shrewd way to nurture brand loyalty. Patrons who have already invested hundreds of bucks in prepaid drinks aren't likely to grab a latte at any other neighborhood cafe. And self-interest being what it is, when they stop by Awaken to refuel, they'll probably bring along their friends.

—Tim Kingston



Capital cuppa.