



## *The Owl*

RYAN WILMAN WORKS DAY AND NIGHT TO HONE HIS CRAFT AND QUENCH THE THIRST OF MILAN RESIDENTS

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

"You could say I had an early midlife crisis.

I went to school to be a teacher, and after graduation, I was working at a coffee shop while I looked for a full-time teaching position. I absolutely fell in love with coffee—but I had a 'career' in my future and working in a coffee shop was not a career, or at least that's what I thought.

I finally got a full-time teaching gig...and I hated it. It got to the point where my wife said, 'You're not the same Ryan I married.' That was a big wake-up call. If anyone knows me, they know that I'm a happy, fun-loving individual, and I had lost that. I couldn't handle the stress and everything else that goes into being an educator.

I have so much respect for teachers because they can deal with something that I can't deal with.

I left teaching and asked, 'Where am I the happiest in life?' My answer was leading a team of baristas and interacting with the community. It was brewing a good cup of coffee and making latte art. It was everything about coffee, and so owning a coffee shop was what I wanted to do.

We could have opened anywhere, but I live in Milan. I saw the potential here, that there could be a lot of movement, and that there was room for me. We also knew we could have fun with it: there were a lot of people here open to change and new experiences.

Not to be arrogant, but there was the potential for it to help develop an entire community.

It was also the perfect time to open a business here. Main Street had just gotten things organized, and all the other small and large organizations connected to the town jumped on board, too. Everyone wanted to do something more.

The first guy I hired was Chris Lee. He was a team member of mine at the coffee shop that I worked at before. We got along great, loved coffee, and had the same perspective about the potential of Milan.

Even before I hired him, Chris believed in the idea to the point where he asked if he could help renovate the building. I told him I could only pay him in pizza and beer...and he still said he would help for a few hours a day.

As I got to know Chris even more, I saw that he's actually a super nerd on everything craft beer and cocktails. He's a true mixologist. He knows the nuances of bitter, sour and sweet and how they blend together to make a great flavor. So, there's that element in the background while he's working as a barista.

One of the core values to me is being a community space, offering things that cultivate community like seating, a good drink and comfort, and being a place where adults can meet, while also being a place where their kids can hang out and play.

Because life doesn't end for people at 3 o'clock, we tried to be open until seven o'clock at night—but we quickly found that not many people are looking for caffeine in the evening.



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At that point, I decided we needed to offer something different, and that 'something different' was adding a bar element.

That's also where Chris' experience with craft beer and cocktails came in, so we started looking into how to get a liquor license.

If you've ever tried to open a bar, you know how difficult that can be. But there was an opportunity for what I call a DDA liquor license. There's probably a fancier name for it, but it's basically a DDA liquor license, which is very specific and can't be resold at another location.

You can only get one if there is growth in the surrounding community...and there was!

One of the requirements was that there was a substantial amount of investment in your building, and there was. When we first started, the building had boarded-up windows, a roof that leaked, and the main level needed new floors and furniture.

The other big criteria for the DDA liquor license was that there needed to be significant investment in the commercial spaces outside of your own building. Milan had Dave Synder's multimillion-dollar renovation just down the street from us, so when I went to apply and they asked, 'Well, has there been a half a million dollars' worth of renovations?', we handed them proof of \$3 million worth of renovations.

They looked at it and laughed because it was more than enough. At that point, it was easy!



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It was important that as we moved through that transformation, we made sure we kept our identity of being a community space. We didn't want to turn into a bar, and we were conscious of the fine line between, 'Hey, my kids walk there to grab a strawberry lemonade and a cookie,' and a bar that families need to run and hide from. So, we did things gradually, initially opening with just beer, cider and wine at first, and adding in the cocktails later.

Being a community space also means trying to involve as many other businesses here as we can, and as Main Street Milan is growing, we've done some unique things inside The Owl. For example, we did an art fair inside of The Owl. It's easy to do something inside your own building, so we swapped all the tables out, threw all the chairs in the back room and brought in 15 artists to feature for a week.

Just about every single piece of furniture in here has been custom-made by either me or someone I know here, besides the chairs. I can't build a chair! The pews that line the walls are actually from the local church down the street. They said, 'We love the mission that you have being a community space and we don't need this many pews. Do want them? They can be yours forever.'

So, we cut them down to size, stripped all the finish, and wood burned them so that they don't look like the standard yellow church pews. Now they help create an aesthetic that fits our vibe. Then I re-sealed them so they can handle another 100 years-worth of use.

Even the bar that we have, the wood itself is actually from a place on East Main. During their renovation, they filled in one of the basements, so the floor joists got ripped out and he offered the wood to me. The wood is actually 180 years old and comes from the first logging industry. I refinished the wood and all the wood burning on it was done by Ink & Dye's tattoo artist, Thad St. Clair.

The creation of this community space has really been a community effort. We're not just The Owl. The reason we're here is because all the people that are connected to us and all the different little bits and pieces that make us who we are.

Some days, it's very hard. People say you know you when you find your dream job because you never work another day in your life. I want to say that I found my dream job and I still work because I love it. I truly love everything that I do here.

There's a book called Strengths Finder. Some people live and die by that and there's a bunch of different strengths like leadership and management. I don't rank the highest in those, but the one thing I did rank really high in is a category called 'Woo.' 'Woo' is literally that, like a cheerleader. It's the gatherer who gets people going and fired up. I might not run the most perfect business ever, but I know how to rally people with me and around me and then charge forward.

This place and mission are who I am, and I've found my calling, for sure."

—Ryan Wilman, The Owl, Morning 'til Night, Milan





# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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