

NEWS

Semaphore Café coffee shop opens in East Garfield Park

Come have a drink or snack and hang out or work at new community space



by **Igor Studenkov**

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Outside the Semaphore Cafe storefront, which opened at the northeast corner of Lake Street and St. Louis Avenue on Jan. 5 | Igor Studenkov

East Garfield Park finally has its own freestanding coffee shop.

Semaphore Cafe quietly opened at 3458 W Lake St, across St. Louis Avenue from the Lakeside Bar, at the start of 2026. Owner Ryan Weber, an East Garfield Park resident since 2024, thought that the neighborhood needed “third space” where residents could hang out, do some work and enjoy some coffee, pastries and sandwiches. The name is a reference to the flag-based signal system once used on the ‘L’ trains.

Weber previously owned and operated the Fourth Estate Cafe in his native Portland, Oregon and the Bokeh cocktail bar in Chicago’s Albany Park neighborhood, where he lived before moving to the West Side.

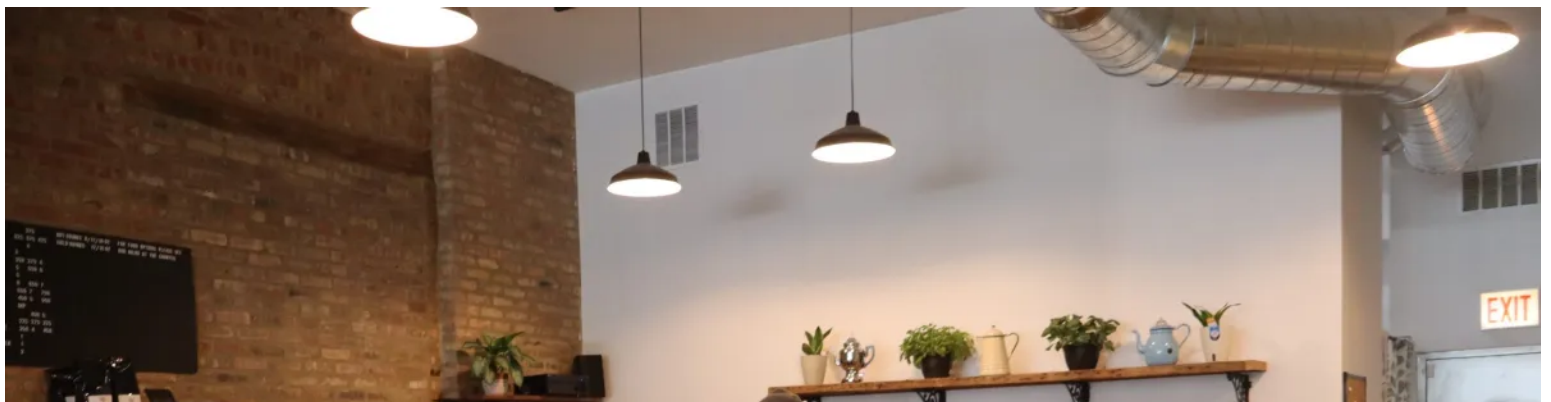
He readily admits that he hasn’t been smooth sailing. City licensing and permitting issues delayed the planned October 2025 opening by three months, which he believes hurt the customer traffic. But Weber said that he hopes that things will pick up as the weather gets warmer.

The last few years saw several new coffee shops, most of which are Black-owned, open on the West Side. That includes what is now called Spill the Beans café in Austin and Monday’s Coffee in North Lawndale. In 2023. Bronzeville-based Momentum Coffee chain opened a location inside Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development (BUILD) Chicago building at 5300 W. Harrison St., and it opened a coffee stand inside Garfield Park Conservatory in 2024.

Most recently, Oak Parkers Andrew and Hannah Follett, who moved to Austin in 2021, opened New Sound Café inside a former gospel records store on the Austin side of the border between the two communities, at 5958 W. Lake St.

Breakthrough Urban Ministries operated Bridge Café inside their FamilyPlex facility at 3219 W. Carroll Ave. until the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also waylaid plans by Passion House Coffee Roasters to open a coffee shop in the same building as their East Garfield Park roastery.

In March 2023, the City of Chicago approved a proposal to redevelop vacant parcels at the southwest corner of Lake Street and Kedzie Avenue that would have included a second Vietfive Coffee location. But those plans have stalled, and the lots remained vacant.





Owner Rick Weber (right) and one of his employees behind the Semaphore Cafe counter. | Igor Studenkov

East Garfield Park has also historically lacked indoor spaces where people could hang out. The neighborhood doesn't have its own public library and not much in the way of sit-down restaurants. While the portion of conservatory where Momentum Coffee stand has been relocated during the building's lobby renovations has some seating, a sign urges visitors not to linger for more than 30 minutes.

Weber told Austin Weekly that he worked in the restaurant/bar industry “for almost 30 years at this point, and pretty much done everything” from baking to washing dishes to pouring cocktails. After selling Bokeh, he decided to open a café in East Garfield Park for a simple reason – because he believed there was a need and a demand for it.

“After moving in, it became apparent to me pretty quickly that the neighborhood needed something like this,” Weber said. “There weren't really a lot of community gathering places, there weren't any restaurants, no cafes, no coffee shops. And I found myself leaving the neighborhood a lot, and I wanted to keep my money in the community.”



Counter-style seating by the window, where Semaphore Cafe customers can look out onto Garfield Park | Igor Studenkov



Over the years, Austin Weekly News heard from many entrepreneurs citing access to capital and navigating the city’s licensing approval process as major challenges. This was compounded by the fact that a business won’t make money while waiting for months for licenses and permits to be processed. Weber said that he was able to use some of the money he made from selling Bokeh, but he also had to max out credit cards.

“I would not recommend,” he added wryly.

Weber said that the licensing process was quicker than it was with a cocktail bar, but one unexpected issue came up: The previous tenant at the space, the Amer Food corner store, had multiple code violations. Weber said the building owner addressed many of those issues already, but clearing that up took time and further delayed the opening.

Semaphore Coffee is spacious, with counter-style seating by the south-facing window, a line of smaller tables by the east wall, larger group tables by the west wall and even a fireplace with couches and small coffee table in the nook in the back.

Weber said he took design cues from the Garfield Park Conservatory, pointing to the plant-themed green wallpaper and plants stacked on top of many pieces of furniture. He found some vintage paintings that also fit the theme. Weber said that most of the furniture, including the fireplace, was salvaged.

Semaphore offers coffee, tea, pastries and sandwiches made in-house, Weber said sourced from the more high-end suppliers.

“I was really focused on trying to bring quality into the neighborhood,” he said. “Just kind of focused on what the neighborhood doesn’t have that we can bring to the table.”

The coffee comes from Near West Side’s Sparrow Coffee roastery, which, Weber said, supplies Michelin-star restaurants. The tea comes from Hermosa-based Spirit Tea. Semaphore’s sources its bagels from Humboldt Park-based Steingold’s Deli and the bread comes from West Town’s Publican Quality Bread

“I really liked their baked goods, and they’re right down the street on Chicago Avenue,” he said. “They’ve been great to work with.”

Weber said that he plans to offer smoothies when the weather warms up – and he was interested in sourcing the produce from local community gardens. He said he was interested in taking part in Garfield Park Farmers Market. While Weber said he hasn’t explored much of the Hatchery food business incubator east of his café, he said he would be open to working with entrepreneurs who work there.

Austin Weekly News visited Semaphore on a Wednesday from noon to 2 p.m. While the café was busy during lunch, the crowd dropped afterwards.

“The neighbors that live around here have been super-enthusiastic, really nice, really supportive,” Weber said. “Our staff has [told me] on how really nice everyone has been.”

Still, he said that “we are not seeing the kind of early morning commuter traffic” as he hoped, which, he said, “is actually a concern.” Weekdays tend to be slower than weekends, which is why their major focus is bringing the evening traffic up.

Gentrification has been an ongoing concern in East Garfield Park since the 2010s. While the neighborhood is still majority-Black, the percentage of white residents increased from 3.39% in 2010 to 5.18% in 2020. Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning estimates that as of 2023 white residents account for 6.6% of the population. In early 2020, DePaul University’s Institute for Housing Studies flagged a significant increase in housing prices community-wide, a trend that has continued.

Weber said that he is conscious of those concerns, but that he ultimately wants to do what's best for his neighbors, who welcomed him with open arms.

“It really feels like this neighborhood is such a desert as far as food options and anything else goes,” he said. “I think every neighborhood deserves a coffee shop. I am concerned about [gentrification]. I live in the neighborhood; I make an investment in the neighborhood. It's not an outsider coming in and putting something in the neighborhood [the neighbors] don't want.”

Angela Taylor is a wellness director at the Garfield Park Community Council, a founder and operator of the Garfield Park Farmers Market and a long-time community resident. She told Austin Weekly News that, while she hadn't had a chance to see inside, her friends have and brought her some samples of the sandwiches.

Taylor said that she is happy to see the storefront occupied again, and she welcomes a coffee shop in East Garfield Park.

“I'm happy they're there at the location they're in,” Taylor said. “It's become an active, functioning infrastructure. I heard that they've been busy. I'm hoping they will be around for a long time.”

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