

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-luxury-car-wash-dog-spa-hookah-and-even-lamb-chops-while-you-wait-11650923170>

WORK & LIFE

The Luxury Car Wash: Dog Spa, Hookah and Even Lamb Chops While You Wait

To stand out, some car washes are getting fancy with their amenities

By Mike Jordan

Updated April 26, 2022 9:15 am ET

ATLANTA—Just a few blocks west of Interstate 75, the words Auto Spa Bistro are written in ornate gold letters at the top of a small building on 14th Street in midtown Atlanta.

Out front there is a wide parking lot where staff are cleaning soapy and shiny cars. It is obviously a car wash, but walking through Auto Spa Bistro's lounge doors might make you forget that detail.

Past the walls of purple plush and faux alligator club chairs, there is a bar where guests can order margaritas, a bottle of SweetWater 420 local beer, premium bourbon, gin and other adult beverages. Depending on the time of day you can order omelets like "The Beamer" with gulf shrimp, mozzarella, tomatoes and spinach, or lunch and dinner options ranging from an assortment of fresh salads to even bourbon-glazed lamb chops. Sometimes, guests can enjoy puffs of cooled smoke from rented hookahs under golden chandeliers.



The Auto Spa Bistro has a bar where customers can order beverages and enjoy a meal.

PHOTO: NYDIA BLAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“A lot of people came in dropping vehicles off, then would go to dinner, to Starbucks, Dunkin’ Donuts or Waffle House. And I was like, it’d be cool to have something housed in one building to extend their stay and increase average tickets,” said Lemont Bradley, owner of Auto Spa Bistro, who came up with the idea to provide amenities after his first car wash business closed 20 years ago.

Mr. Bradley says he is getting creative with amenities and services to make his car wash more like a club. Others are doing it to entice interest from investors, particularly since car-wash chain Mister Car Wash raised more than \$560 million in a June 2021 initial public offering.

At Clean Ride Auto Spa in Sioux Falls, S.D., customers can enjoy a freshly brewed cup of locally roasted coffee inside the Clean Bean, its coffee shop. Some aren’t even purchasing a car service; they just pull up for a caramel macchiato or chai, fresh-baked breakfast sandwiches and pastries such as the popular white chocolate raspberry scone, says Clean Ride’s administrator Heather Dorhout.



Some guests smoke hookahs at the Atlanta car wash.

PHOTO: NYDIA BLAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Clean Ride car-cleaning and detailing packages range from \$12 to \$450. They also have a dog spa: self-serve pet-washing stations, which come with post-wash “pup cups” filled with doggy snacks and whipped cream.

Clean Ride opened in February 2020. Ms. Dorhout, a former high-school math teacher, began working for the Clean Bean as a barista more than a year ago but now manages marketing, accounting and human resources. She says the car-washing services equate to around 90% of revenue, but the additional amenities are fun ways of setting Clean Ride apart from competitors, particularly for the customers who she says like to “spill their stories” on friendly baristas while they await their freshly cleaned vehicles.

“Eventually we’d love to grow that side of the business,” Ms. Dorhout says of the Clean Bean and the Dog Spa. “We’ve done catering events recently, but right now it’s more to help with the experience and customer service.”

According to a March report from Grand View Research, the car-wash market is expected to reach \$38.61 billion by 2030, at a compound annual growth rate of 3.1%.

Eric Wulf, chief executive of Chicago-based trade group International Carwash Association, says the mixed-model car-wash business has high potential for success. Large car wash owners are likely going to focus on creating a scalable subscription-based business. The resulting market bifurcation would then motivate more independent entrepreneurs to launch unique models like Auto Spa Bistro to compete.



Employees wash cars at Auto Spa Bistro.

PHOTO: NYDIA BLAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The mixed model is something Mr. Wulf has seen in many forms, particularly overseas. He says one of the most unique car-wash operations he has seen is in Zurich, where one car wash occasionally has a dance club on the second floor where visitors dance while they wait. Car-wash cafes are also prevalent in Australia and the Philippines.

The car-wash restaurant model isn't for everyone, said Mr. Wulf. The risks include spending a lot of money to build something that simply doesn't bring in more customers. There is also the risk that a private-equity-backed group builds a subscription model next to your business.

Martin Emmett, president and CEO of Dirty Dogs Car Wash, isn't taking that risk anymore.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What amenities are you finding at your car wash? Join the conversation below.

“The forward pressure in the labor market is going to make it difficult to implement here, or at least implement well,” he said.

Dirty Dogs, based in Atlanta, opened its first location in 2018 in Calhoun, Ga., with a coffee bar and other concessions. But Mr. Emmett nixed the full-service model, moving to a more streamlined business model centered on high-quality service without a high number of employees. Dirty Dogs also operates in Alabama.

Mr. Emmett's simple express exterior model generated annual revenue of around \$5.6 million for 2021. In February, Dirty Dogs secured a \$35 million investment from Salt Lake City-based Cynosure Group. Mr. Emmett plans on using the funding to expand to Florida and open several of 25 locations nationwide in the next 36 months.



Menu options at Auto Spa Bistro include seafood, fresh salads and omelets.

PHOTO: NYDIA BLAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Setting up a car wash is much more expensive than it was decades ago due to technology advancements and rising real-estate prices. Mr. Wulf said it is part of the reason owners are turning to private-equity groups for investment. About 15 years ago, he estimates it was around \$2.5 million to set up an express exterior car wash. Now he puts that figure at \$7 million.

Mr. Bradley is banking on a loyal customer base and celebrity clients to keep Auto Spa Bistro in business. Former NBA star Shaquille O'Neal is a member of the company's franchising advisory board, for example.

Mr. Bradley has already started with a new concept called Eco Car Spa just a mile south of Auto Spa Bistro. The "waterless" car wash uses biodegradable products and offers services that range from \$15 for an outside-only wash to \$500 for a full detailing. Mr. Bradley is pairing the environmentally friendly car wash with a healthier food menu that includes quinoa and kale salads with berry vinaigrette, a variety of fresh juices, and "superfood" smoothies made with açai and coconut water.

"I'm not rushing it; I want to make sure we will be successful in their territories and we'll be able to conquer new territory," he said.



Jacques Rozier, dark glasses, and Lemont Bradley, owner of Auto Spa Bistro. Mr. Bradley is banking on a loyal customer base and celebrity clients to keep Auto Spa Bistro in business.

PHOTO: NYDIA BLAS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Copyright © 2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.