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## East Memphis T-shirt shop specializes in quick turnaround

By Lindsay Jones / Special to The Commercial Appeal  
 Posted December 30, 2010 at 12:01 a.m.

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Products are printed fresh daily, as the tagline says, at Shirt Bistro in East Memphis.

"I call it an oven. We're cooking shirts," said Wyatt Isbell, one of the partners.

"(Restaurants) have custom-produced foods; we have custom-produced shirts, made to order."



LINDSAY JONES/SPECIAL TO THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Partner Wyatt Isbell "cooks" a shirt for the Red Rover advertising firm at Shirt Bistro in East Memphis.

Open since May, the business occupies the former Shops of Ann Adler and A Basket Case flower shop at Poplar and Mendenhall, about 3,200 square feet altogether.

About 1,000 square feet are devoted to sales and customer service; the rest of the space holds the manufacturing equipment needed to fill orders of all sizes.

Britt Britton and Wyatt and Candy Isbell opened the business with the idea that everyone buys T-shirts, even during the doldrums of winter. Though the period from November to January is usually a down time for screen printers, they said they haven't seen a dip in business yet.

"We have definitely made a mark as far as screen printing goes," said Wyatt Isbell. "We're on the higher end of the

curve for volume."

Customers also like service on the spot.

Orders range from single shirts for individuals to hundreds for civic or sports groups. Anyone who stops by the shop with an idea can sit with a graphic designer on the retail side until their artwork is ready to be transferred to a shirt in the adjacent production area. Then the shirt is printed from a machine that resembles a large paper printer. It uses a process called direct to garment technology, allowing a single shirt to be printed in about 15 minutes.

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in about 15 minutes.

After the printing is finished, the shirt is transferred to a drying press that fixes the full-color ink at about 320 degrees, much like a sandwich would be made in a panini grill.

For the larger orders, another, more complex machine spits out shirts with the help of an on-site screen printer and his assistant. Other Shirt Bistro services include rhinestone designs and embroidery.

The idea, Candy Isbell said, is to open a coffee bar out front for customers as they sit and wait for their orders to be filled. She and the other partners also would like to add design stations for people who want to be more hands-on.

"That's kind of the whole concept and goal," she said. "You can come in and have coffee and have meetings -- just like you do at Starbucks, while (your T-shirt) is being made."

Although anyone can customize a shirt on various websites, they can't get the shirts almost instantly. They also don't know what the shirts will really look like until they arrive in the mail.

This way, customers will be able to see a mock-up before shirts are printed.

The partners got the idea for this much quicker delivery process when they ran a kiosk at a mall before committing to their current space. Passersby would request projects such as printing or embroidering names on pant legs or embellishing T-shirts for Teddy bears.

"We didn't make a lot of money doing it, but we made a lot of contacts," Candy Isbell said. "We learned that people want individualized items, and they want them quickly."

For now, the retail side sports exposed bricks on one side and a warm gold paint color on the partition that blocks off the production area. Wicker chairs and an overstuffed couch sit near a bistro table up front.

Eventually, the business owners would like to move the manufacturing operation elsewhere and expand the retail space and coffee bar concept.

But one step at a time.

"This test run in business has helped us redefine what we want and what customers want," Candy Isbell said.

### Shirt Bistro

**Address:** 4966 Poplar

**Phone:** 763-3330

**Hours:** Mon.-Fri. 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.; Sat. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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