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BusinessLI Article: "Brewing Up A Formula For Success"



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Brewing Up a Formula for Success

by Erin Harrington-Plonski

Having a cup of coffee used to be about as routine as waking up in the morning. A staple of life, coffee has been around for what seems like forever. Just some of the rituals include morning coffee, coffee and dessert, the old-fashioned coffee clotch, and the neighborly "come over for coffee" invites by the back fence. Even in times of crisis, people, instinctively, put on a pot of coffee. It seems to bring order to our lives, even when they're otherwise in chaos. So, what's all the commotion over coffee these days? It's really nothing new, is it? Well, maybe, these days, it is.

Suddenly, it seems, people are craving cafe lattes, cafe mochas, espressos, double espressos, cappuccinos, frappuccinos, zappuccinos...you name it, and it's likely a coffee somewhere, to somebody.

Take this trend, throw a Hamptons spin on it, and you've got a formula for success brewing. Let's face it, coffee lovers are a loyal breed, and a loyal following is just what business partners Jason Belkin and Pepe Martinez are capturing with The Hampton Coffee Company. From the farmer next door to Christie Brinkley, their customers just keep coming back for more.

It's an interesting evolution. The original Hampton Coffee Company, located at 869 Montauk Highway in Water Mill, launched, under a previous owner, in 1994. Martinez worked there since its beginnings, starting as a dishwasher and making his way through the ranks to manager. Belkin also worked there, in the early days, as an assistant manager while finishing up his journalism degree at NYU.

"We always thought we could do so much more with it," Belkin relays. "And,



The Hampton Coffee Company serves everyone from the farmer next door to Christie Brinkley.

as fate would have it, we got the chance, a few years later." In '98, when the previous owner decided to sell, Martinez, who was still aboard, called Belkin, who was working as a reporter for Neighborhood News 12 at the time, and asked if he still wanted to go in on it, together. Now, three years later, the two not only have lines out the door at the Water Mill location, but have opened a second at 127 Main Street, Westhampton Beach. Looking to the future, they hope to continue to grow and add another store each year, both on Long Island and in Manhattan.

In addition to the freshly roasted coffee served, The Hampton Coffee Company is also unique in that, along with the home-baked fare of muffins, scones and croissants served, they also offer soup, salads and sandwiches, as well as dinner by candlelight with such choices as shrimp scampi, steak and fresh grilled salmon. Also dished up on their outdoor courtyard are authentic recipes Martinez brought with him from Mexico, including tamales and fajitas. "We try to have something for everybody," Belkin explains. "Some people come in wearing shorts and sandals," he continues. "Others come in dressed in a suit and tie. So it's nice, because everybody feels comfortable here."

And when customers can't be there, they can log on to the www.hampton-coffeecompany.com website—which Belkin designed and maintains himself—and continue to consume their favorite

coffee when they return to their homes during the off-season.

Also available for order are teas, mugs, gift baskets, Java Classic CDs, and more. The website also supports their wholesale roasting business; The Hampton Coffee Company supplies coffee to many major restaurants, including Gurney's Inn & Spa Resort in Montauk, Babette's, Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, La Maison Moderne in Manhattan, and others.

The off-season, obviously, is a bit leaner for the Hampton Coffee Company. In the summer, to accommodate those lines out the door, they employ 30 staff. Off-season, they maintain ten. The beauty of it is, most of the summer staff are college students, and need to leave at the end of August. The ten full-time employees are kept on through the winter, another perk of employment there. Recognizing the need for good help, Belkin and Martinez try to give back as much as possible to their staff; new employees get treated to dinner at an East End restaurant their first week, and all are given an end of summer bonus and bash. Full-timers are offered health benefits.

As Long Island's largest independently-owned roaster retailer on Long Island, the roasting end of the business is an interesting one. So much so, that often times on roasting days, customers pause to gaze through the glass doors of the cafe into the next room as Martinez,

a roastmaster, applies his own techniques (by hand, not computer), to the roasting of the coffees. Belkin notes that coffee is actually green, likening the beans to a split pea before made into soup. He explains that they go into Staten Island and Brooklyn, because at the docks, there are warehouses with imported coffees from many different countries. "They come in 60-pound sacks and we'll go with a bag of Costa Rican, a bag of Jamaican, this and that, bring them out here, roast them, and turn them into the finished product." So, where freshness is concerned, The Hampton Coffee Company certainly has the edge because, as Belkin points out, even Starbucks, also known for roasting its own coffee, does all its roasting for the entire East Coast in Pennsylvania.

Although Belkin concedes there is competition on the East End, their sales have actually gone up since Starbucks came into Bridgehampton a few years ago, and continue to rise substantially each year. It's not by accident.

"Nobody could buy this business and just start roasting their own coffee," Belkin says. "Pepe already was trained to be a roastmaster; it took him years to learn. And, I brought the public relations skills from my training." He also served as a manager in various food service operations throughout his college years at NYU. "I have one end of the business, he has the other. Together, we've mastered it."

The reason? Likely, Belkin observes, is because "we just work really hard. We try to do everything right. And, we did it all ourselves. We took some loans and our savings from working over the years." Another is also that The Hampton Coffee Company reaches out to the community as well as a myriad of charities. They donate their time and their products setting up tables at fund-raisers for such causes as Boys Harbor, Make-A-Wish Foundation, South Fork Breast Cancer Health Coalition, Mill Neck School for Deaf Children, and others. "We try our hardest to do the right thing by everyone," Belkin explains. "We kind of do good deeds, and it does come back to you."

Indeed, it does. Coffee, anyone? ☐