

Small Bean businesses

As cafes overtake pubs as the main place to meet and greet, there's been an explosion of specialist and independent coffee shops. In such a competitive climate, having an angle is everything.



Raising the bar

How London-based Redemption Roasters is helping young offenders get a fresh start.

MAX DUBIEL DIDN'T start out in business with charitable intentions, but in 2016, when the Ministry of Justice approached the entrepreneurial coffee wholesaler about a barista training program for young offenders, he saw an opportunity. After visiting HM Prison Aylesbury he and business partner Ted Rosner realised there was a gap in the market. 'Coffee is a huge and fast-growing business, especially in London, but at the same time underprivileged youths have absolutely no access to it,' says Dubiel. 'The idea came up, not just to offer these guys skills, but also links into employment.'

This was the birth of Redemption Roasters, a speciality coffee business with a social conscience that runs cafes in Bloomsbury, Farringdon, and the new Coal Drops Yard retail district. But the real talking point is the company's sleek roastery,



BEAN AND GONE

Inmates at Aylesbury roast the coffee before it's shipped to Redemption's London cafes

housed within the young offenders institution at Aylesbury. Here, inmates aged 18 to 21 learn basic barista skills and customer service, and roast the coffee bound for Redemption's cafes and broader wholesale business. There are also new barista training academies at HMP Bullingdon, Springhill

and Wormwood Scrubs, with more planned to bring additional trainees through the system. The ideal outcome is for inmates who 'graduate' with Redemption to find work with the company on their release.

'That's when they are at their most vulnerable,' says Dubiel. 'So we

hand-hold them and are probably a bit more lenient when they're late or if they have small hiccups. After about six months, we pass them on to one of our wholesale clients or the wider industry. If they don't reoffend, we've done our job.'

It might sound worthy but as Dubiel point out, having a business with solid corporate social responsibility equates to a strong business advantage. 'We've done very well out of the public impact we've had,' he says. 'It gives us a clear point of difference. Also, in our case, working with ex-offenders means working with an individual who has been given a second chance and who will therefore work hard and be really loyal. And if someone has a criminal record you'll know a lot about them – much more so than hiring someone through the labour market.'

What it does mean, however, is that Redemption has to hold itself to a higher standard. 'Our product has to be amazing, even better than the competition, because it's made in prison,' says Dubiel. 'We couldn't be shouting from our high horse and then be serving up bad coffee.'

redemptionroasters.com



Pressing ahead

Experience working with big chains enabled Mat North to turn Full Court Press into one of Bristol's best-loved independents.

You got your start as a barista at Caffè Nero. What did you learn from that experience?

'Working for any of the big chains is a real education; it gave me an excellent grounding in efficiencies and good financial practices. Chains have systems for literally everything – they are at the point where they can measure and quantify all of the basics, like greetings, wait times, wastage etc, so they can

focus on other things. They know just how easy it is to lose a customer, so these systems allow the staff to focus on service to avoid this happening.'

Bristol is renowned for its food and drink culture. How has the local scene changed since you started Full Court Press?

'When we opened six years ago we were only the third of the new wave of shops to open

in Bristol. The speciality scene only really arrived in Bristol in late 2012, so what's been amazing is the rate of change, both in quality and offering. We've seen explosions of quality independent bakers, breweries, distilleries, cocktail bars and, of course, coffee shops. It's a very exciting time to be involved.'

How do you make an impression in such a competitive market?

'If you don't have a USP, then branding and look really comes to the fore, though this can be a problem as it leads to homogeneity of both look and offer – something perpetuated by Pinterest, Instagram etc. In this situation it's all about location and service. What we've done at FCP is aim for the very top of the quality sector of the market. Our offer is more akin to a wine bar than it is to a traditional cafe, with new coffees to try each week and a very limited food offering.'

What have independent cafes brought to coffee culture in the UK?

'Variety. Ostensibly we all serve the same product, but it's easy to see that there are myriad ways to present it. Thankfully, there are enough customers that fall on either side of the fence to keep both independents and chains in business.'

