

Coffee for good

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Food and drink connect cultures and people. I've often felt that sharing a meal or just a cup of coffee is a great way to bring people together.



Image from Virgin.com

It's no surprise to me that roughly a quarter of the entrepreneurs that Virgin StartUp has funded over the years have been food entrepreneurs. They are truly a special group of people, often with a deep sense of purpose to make the world a better place through their amazing and tasty products. Many people are far more passionate about food than other things they buy. And that's also why so many food consumers want to know that a product they buy is sustainable and contributes in some way to positive social change.

Recently, I was impressed to learn about two wonderful coffee entrepreneurs doing just that. The first is **Change Please**, a Virgin StartUp-funded and Big Issue-supported business, which sells sustainably-sourced coffee from mobile carts manned by homeless people.



Image from Virgin Trains

By **Richard Branson**
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I had the pleasure of meeting Cemal on Necker Island at a Virgin Unite event a few years ago. He impressed everyone with his sense of mission to make a difference in the lives of those who deserve a better chance. Others agreed, and I was pleased when, after attending Virgin StartUp's flagship workshop 'Doing Business With Big Business', Cemal was chosen to serve his coffee with a purpose on our Virgin Trains.

The one million cups of coffee Virgin Trains sells on board each year will be brewed with Change Please coffee. The contract to supply coffee for Virgin Trains will enable Change Please to train more baristas, aiming to train 107 people each year as a result of the partnership. Virgin Trains will also work with Change Please to include successful trainees in their recruitment process, to offer them a chance to use their new skills in a job with Virgin Trains.

Another great example of a purpose-driven coffee business is **Redemption Roasters**, a social enterprise tackling re-offending amongst young offenders. In 2016, Max Dubiel and Ted Rosner established a roastery and barista training centre at Aylesbury Young Offenders Institute. They used it to train young offenders and give them the skills needed to help them with employment upon release from prison.



Image from Redemption Roasters

They now run barista academies at HMP Bullingdon and HMP Springhill, as well as supporting their graduates find work. They either directly employ them in their three cafes across London or with their wholesale clients. I've always believed that giving people a second chance is our best hope to reduce reoffending rates effectively. In the UK, more and more businesses are beginning to realise the untapped potential of hiring people who have spent time behind bars.

Our own experience at Virgin shows that people with prior convictions are among the most motivated and loyal employees you can find anywhere. Virgin businesses in the UK, including **Virgin Trains West Coast** and **Virgin Active**, have recruited dozens of people directly from prison. It's companies like these that continue to inspire me and I hope more business leaders follow their lead. If we can help lift someone out of homelessness or avoid reoffending by buying a cup of coffee, I'll drink to that.