



Stanford eCorner

A Fresh Perspective on Coffee

James Freeman, *Blue Bottle Coffee*

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James Freeman, founder and CEO of Blue Bottle Coffee, recalls how his business was born. Formerly a freelance musician, Freeman says his passion for roasting his own coffee beans drove him to put down the clarinet and learn basic commerce. He began by selling coffee at a local farmers' market and saw an opportunity for differentiation by emphasizing freshness, like other categories of edibles had begun to do.



Transcript

- As a classical musician, as a clarinetist, I basically from age 12 to age 34, all day, every day, thought about my art, so I thought about getting better at the clarinet. You know, I made a living. I was decent at it. I kinda got the jobs that I didn't want to get and didn't get the jobs I really wanted. But it's hard to make a living, and I did some interesting music. I had a dream of how I wanted to sound, but it was very hard to achieve that dream. It was this dysmorphic, sort of the sonic equivalent of anorexia nervosa. I could never really appreciate the work I'd done or how I'd done it. And the longer that I played, sort of the more lost I became. I had this yearning to make beautiful art, and nothing ever seemed to be beautiful enough.

It was a hard way to live. But I had a nerdy little hobby. I would roast coffee on a perforated baking sheet in my oven. And it was a very sort of crude way of roasting coffee, but I loved it so much. Obviously, it filled the kitchen with smoke and made my ex-wife, who was an opera singer at the time, very angry with me. (audience laughs) But I got this idea of coffee being a fresh food. I was a farmer's market shopper. And I didn't see coffee being treated in the same very personal way, very fresh way that these great farmers that I would patronize treated their products. And I thought that was odd. At the time I was doing this, it was in the mid-90s, I'm afraid to say.

It was a long time ago. You literally couldn't find a coffee produced commercially that had a roast date on it. The major coffee roasters weren't talking about freshness in the way that I really believed was important with coffee, because I would drink the coffee I roasted at home. Day one it tasted a certain way, day two, day three. It had an arc that would peak a few days later and then decline. And that was so exciting for me. That was very compelling for me. And I couldn't understand why the coffee that I liked so much, that I roasted at home, I couldn't have that experience of drinking it somewhere else. And so this idea of being so miserable at what you're doing that you have to find a change, you have to change something, that's where the idea of stopping playing the clarinet after so many years and going into coffee, chasing this nerdy little dream, that became more and more crystallized in my mind. Because the farmer's market is a great way of, if you don't really know business, it's a great way of understanding commerce at a very basic level.

I mean, what do you do? You show up once a week, you give somebody money for something, they give you this thing. The producer goes back to where they produce it, they farm it, they make it, and they repeat it. The next week they bring it back, you bring back some more money. You know, it's like you don't need to go to business school to kind of understand how that works.