



Stanford eCorner

Opening a Speakeasy Cafe

James Freeman, *Blue Bottle Coffee*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/4038/Opening-a-Speakeasy-Cafe>

Blue Bottle Coffee's James Freeman describes how the opening of an unconventional cafe boosted his confidence. Despite its odd location, limited menu and longer wait times, Freeman says the cafe was a successful effort to work within constraints. "Fortunately, I didn't even know what market research was," Freeman says. "We just did what we thought was the most delicious thing we could possibly do."



Transcript

- In 2005, January 23, 2005 we open in Hayes Valley and at the time, that alleyway was a dead end alleyway that smelled like pee. It was not the most hospitable place to be, but I knew a friend of mine owned that building and he, I didn't have enough money to open a cafe and he said, "well why don't we do something in my garage?" and I said, "sure" and that's what we did. And, it was very odd. It's still a little bit odd now, but it was very odd place to open a cafe, but I think about the beginner's luck that that represented. Had I had more money, I would have felt the pressure to open a more traditional seeming cafe, but this way because the architecture was so different, the way that it subverted the expectations of the guests in an interesting way, I think it made them more receptive to having a radically different approach to making coffee. We ground everything to order and prepared all the brewed coffee to order. We didn't have it in urns. We had a six drink menu, no sizes, no flavors. Every milk drink was steamed to order with latte art on the top. It was very, very different.

Had I done market research, I would have asked people questions like: Oh, do you want to buy coffee that's roasted lighter than the coffee you say you like? Do you wanna pay a little bit more for coffee? Do you wanna wait a little bit longer for coffee? Do you wanna have fewer choices among drinks or sizes or flavors? And, you know I would have heard no, no, no, no, no, and no. (audience chuckles) But fortunately, I didn't even know what market research was. (audience laughs) So, we just did what we thought was the most delicious thing we could possibly do. And it worked. It was not so busy at first, but it totally worked.