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On The Table #17

Enduring Quality - Survive the End of the Boom

Dear cyber reader, Well in Seattle, the party is ending. The stampede of opportunists and wannabes that inundated our new industry, loosely defined as *Specialty Coffee*, are now a stampede to file chapter 11 bankruptcy. That leaves the question hanging in the air: what has endured from our 10 years of being the "hot business" to open?

One thing that has proven to be an enduring strategy for the big chains is to be ubiquitous throughout the land being recognizable and available is an enduring quality. To be everywhere with a shop on every corner, or two, with a comforting logo promising the familiar is one path into the future. It is the path of big bucks and big business. Reinventing Folgers with a coffee house concept. But, is the coffee special?

A big business needs to have a warehouse to store the "product" to meet fluctuations in demand. When the product is coffee that means your coffee is stale. There is no way for the big outfits to control freshness.

So they need to rely on marketing to keep the buzz going. Brilliant ad campaigns to woo the average American into heir doors need to be refreshed. They need to keep coming out with new drinks. What we have seen is a parade of coffee flavored slushies with different names to fuel the continuous need for something new. So the big companies are becoming rich slushie vendors and Americans are happy with this.

But there is another path, smaller and more intriguing, the path of expertise.

Coffee, especially espresso, is a hard sport. For ten years, I have researched espresso preparation and published everything I have found out. It is an interlocking maze of inter-related variables, including keeping the coffee fresh, to control to achieve excellence. But, everything you need to know is in my books and videos and on

this web site.

Now more than ever it is clear that mastering espresso may be the only way to compete in the long run with the big chains. With their large size they can obtain coffee accessories, and contract beans at a lower price than you can. In strict retail terms you are up against a category-killer. Forget beating them on price.

If you want to beat them on service and pack your store with cheerful, bubbly types who captivate your customers with the "cult of personality", these staff eventually leave. We call this the personality trap in our coffee business. Customers bond with a charismatic individual and that individual moves on, well so do a lot of those customers. (As the owner you will not be able to run your bar yourself or you will burn out eventually. A few shifts a week, max.)

If you try to make it by securing a superior location, that lease will run out some time. And, the big boys, if your location is truly hot, will be right there offering the landlord more than you can pay. Or they will locate right next to you and bleed you dry with a price/service war.

So what is left as a viable strategy to enjoy a life in the coffee business is only the path of expertise. Master the espresso and the world will beat a path to your door. I know this from personal experience. I am surrounded by every kind of coffee shop you can imagine on Capitol Hill in Seattle, from the big chains, to the grunge shops, to the powerful combination bakery/cafe type independents. We are beating them to death just by making a better espresso. And, so will you.

Ciao for now!

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