

BREWING UP

a fresh approach

Imbibe Coffee are leading the way when it comes to good business practices... By Keeley Ryan



BUSINESS:
Gary Grant
(also left) of
Imbibe Coffee
Roasters

Imbibe Coffee Roasters are brewing up a new approach to business. The company, based out of Dolphin's Barn in Dublin, follows a model of "conscious capitalism", which sees them give 1% of their sales to Women's Aid, 1% of sales to origin projects and 1% of sales shared among the staff.

And founder Gary Grant told *Chic* how giving back was something that they had "very much" set out to do after they started roasting in 2018.

He said, "From the day the roastery started, we decided to give 1% of our sales to Women's Aid. That's sales, not profits — people often think that it's profit and, for a company our size, if we were to do 1% of our profits then it would be no more than a marketing exercise. It wouldn't be very much, as

we're a small business.

"We went with 1% of sales and, after the first year, it seemed to be going quite well. We decided that we would also give 1% of sales to origin projects, and a further 1% to the staff.

"The people that work with me are amazing people and they work really, really hard. They're the ones that do the roasting, they're the ones who look after the quality — so it kind of made sense to me that they share in any growth or success."

Their first blend was Kaleidoscope, which is an "iteration of two coffee beans, one from Peru and one from Colombia."

Gary opened up about the story behind the creation of Kaleidoscope — and the funding of origin projects.



He said, "When we started roasting, I had an existing customer base and I knew that they needed an espresso-based coffee. And obviously, it had to be good.

"That became Kaleidoscope. Kaleidoscope is an iteration of two coffee beans, one from Peru and one from Columbia.

"A friend of mine, Damian Blackburn, who has a roastery in Yorkshire called Dark Woods, provided so much help and assistance and advice when we started, because he had been in the coffee business for a very long time. We went over to his roastery for training and then, for the first two weeks, he came over to work in ours. He gave me a lot of advice on sourcing.

"He said, 'you're doing this thing with Women's Aid, and there's this organisation called Café Femenino who promote gender equality in coffee-producing countries'. He said, 'why don't you get a Café Femenino coffee into Kaleidoscope?'

"We came across an all-female coffee co-op in Peru called Lonya Grande and it very much fit the profile of the coffee that we wanted to do. So, we bought the entire harvest for Europe in the first year that we started — and that was, I guess, half of the story in Kaleidoscope.

"The other part of the coffee was from Colombia. We got onto our supplier there and said 'look, we have half a story with this coffee — but we'd like to complete it. Is there anything that we can do with this co-op?'

"He made us aware of an infrastructure problem they were having at the co-op. He sent a photo that showed kids crossing a river on a tree trunk with this little handrail to get to school. We decided that we would fund a footbridge to replace the tree trunks with an actual safe, physical structure.

"Since then, we have funded a second footbridge at that co-op. And last year, we also funded a wet mill at the all-female co-op in Peru.

"A wet mill is basically a place where you process coffee. Coffee is like a cherry that you pick off a tree — I don't think a lot of people realise that coffee is a fruit, essentially. So it does need to be processed before being shipped to anywhere else around the world."

Imbibe started roasting coffee in May 2018 — and Gary recalled how it was the Brexit vote that led him to make the move to start roasting.

He said, "I worked in financial services for years, and then the recession came and I no longer had a job. I needed to do something. I had some money put aside for a couple of months, and things were fine — but then I kind of realised, 'God, I better start working'. I actually saw a documentary on coffee called Black Gold, which is about Ethiopian coffee farmers and unions. And I just decided, 'OK, I'm going to try and sell coffee'.

"I didn't really know a lot about coffee at the time, so the fact that the business survived — or kind of made it to the point where we began roasting — was dumb luck and persistence. I think that if I tried to do it today, it would fail.

"I was lucky. I mean, there was a lot of persistence involved — and I suppose that was kind of Imbibe One, so to speak, where I was importing roasted coffee from the UK. But the day of the Brexit vote, I immediately decided that I better start to do it myself. We started roasting on the 1st of May, 2018."

And since they started roasting, it has

been a busy few years.

He continued, "It has been a really — I hate to use the word, but it's been a wild ride. There was Brexit, the roastery started up — starting any type of business is difficult and has its challenges — and then Covid came. And that provided more challenges.

"I guess some good things can come out of a crisis — Brexit being one, as we started the roastery. And before Covid, we didn't really sell any retail coffee. But then Covid hit and half of our customers closed overnight, so we decided we better start — just to make sure I could continue to pay staff and meet my rent.

"Our retail offering now accounts for about 20% of the business — so it's been moderately, relatively successful."

Gary told how in 2021, they gave back "about 16%" of their profits for the year between the projects and their staff.

He said, "I get that every business can't do these things, because of margins or there's all kinds of reasons. But what we're doing is the way that we're doing it — it's entirely sustainable.

"I got our accounts last year a couple of weeks back. Last year, between those projects and our staff, we donated about 16% of our profits for 2021.

"Now, we're in a money-making business — we are profitable. We're just able to do this and I figure that if we can do it, if we're in a position to.

"Everybody who works at Imbibe is well paid and the model is kind of simple — the more we sell, the more we donate and the more our staff will be paid. And that just

strikes me as fair."

Gary explained that one of the stand-out moments so far was when they received the photograph of the footbridge "and seeing something that we actually did that makes a difference to people."

He continued, "I realise that it isn't an enormous difference, it isn't min blowing — we haven't built The Golden Gate Bridge or anything. But it's nice to know that the kids aren't crossing the river on a tree trunk to get to school."

Gary also opened up about some of the more difficult moments — and how there's "always" something that comes up.

He said, "Our business has five full time people, and a couple of part-timers. And when you're running a business like this — roasting coffee is difficult. It isn't a matter of, you know, throwing beans into a machine into 11 minutes and then there you go

"Every single coffee that we buy roasts differently.

"Having to source coffees can be difficult. We obviously have our core range, which is Kaleidoscope, El Puente and Sonya Grande — but we do a tonne of single origin coffees, which I suppose are our more expensive coffees. We want them to be unusual and as unique as possible.

"We would sample maybe 20 different coffees a week, but we might not pick them because we feel that they're not good enough."

There's also things like "energy prices, or packaging, or Covid" — and even the Suez Canal.

He continued, "It's not something I ever, ever thought about, but when that ship got stuck in March 2021, that led to massive difficulties for everyone.

"You're kind of hoping, 'Oh god, we've contracted this coffee — I really hope it gets here, because if it doesn't, we might struggle'.

"It's not that there's always a Suez Canal moment, but something will come up on a weekly basis where you're like 'oh my god, how will we solve this?'. But I'm a catastrophist by nature — so I'm always worrying about something that I probably shouldn't be."

Gary told how the pandemic has seen a shift in people's views on coffee, with home brewing becoming more and more popular over the last few years.

He said, "I know for us, people have gotten way more into coffee. I thought that when we started selling coffee, everybody would want to buy ground coffee — but the majority of coffee that we sell on our website would be whole bean coffee.

"People have obviously gone out to purchase grinders or a V60 or an AeroPress to make the coffee at home. And they just really got an interest in coffee, overall.

"I get tons of emails from people, asking to recommend a coffee or telling me what they would want in a coffee — and we wouldn't have received that before the pandemic, not on a great scale. I think that people are taking coffee far more seriously and I think that home brewing has become a much bigger thing."

Gary explained how, going forward, he would like to see the company double in size — something he reckons is "very achievable".

He continued, "But beyond that, I don't really want to take it any further. I've no desire to have a massive business, I don't ever want to. I think we're very good on quality, in terms of what we put out and what we do.

"And this is completely my opinion, others may disagree — but I think that if we went beyond double our size, the quality would suffer. At double our size, everybody in Imbibe will be paid well and we will be able to put out a really, really excellent product."

To find out more about Imbibe or purchase their products, visit imbibe.ie.



“WE CAME ACROSS AN ALL-FEMALE COFFEE CO-OP.”



BEAN COME TRUE: Gary; and (above) Aidan Sullivan