

Spotlight

HYPNOCOFFEE

Davis, W. Va.

by Peter Agostinelli



In many ways, Tony Williams fits the stereotype of the engineer: detailed, captivated with the science of things, and always on the lookout for new methods and materials. “I’m also a little bit of a control freak,” admits the former biomedical engineer.

But unlike most people with his background, Williams spends his days roasting coffee beans in small batches and bringing out the best notes in varieties from Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ethiopia and other origins. He’s also a relaxed and smiling small business owner who welcomes regulars and visitors equally, regardless of whether they’re coffee newbies, casual drinkers or serious espresso enthusiasts.

Williams and his wife, Summer, are co-owners of Hypnocoffee in Davis, W. Va., a tiny town that borders the state line between the Canaan Valley of West Virginia and the far-western reaches of Maryland. Before launching the business, the couple had been home coffee enthusiasts and regular coffee shop customers. Their hobby evolved into a professional venture after they decided to move from Florida to West Virginia’s Tucker County, an Appalachian region noted for its small-town mountain culture. “We chose a coffee shop because there wasn’t one here, and the coffee that was available was terrible,” Tony says. “We had the idea while still living in Florida but started a business plan about a year prior to opening.”

Early growth

The rest is a story that’s just beginning. Only two years after opening Hypnocoffee, Tony and Summer are taking stock and planning an even bigger future. They’ve seen two years of steady sales growth, and they’re now looking to expand their commercial roasting business and fine-tune their café in Davis.

Tony Williams, a native of Pensacola, Fla., grew up drinking Louisiana’s Community Coffee in a panhandle town known more for its beaches and naval base than for its latte art. He studied biomedical engineering while enlisted in the Community College of the Air Force and built a career in the health-care sector. He eventually left his position at a hospital to start his own biomedical engineering consulting practice. The business expanded but left him searching for a new, more gratifying entrepreneurial adventure that accommodated spending more time with Summer and their growing family.

Williams sold the engineering consultancy a few years ago, and the family moved to Davis (population 600), where the quality-coffee philosophy has caught on quickly in one of the region’s most popular playgrounds for outdoor enthusiasts. Hypnocoffee has become a fixture in the area thanks to its micro-roastery business—serving both retail and commercial clients—and inviting espresso bar. The space is an unofficial community gathering spot for both locals and tourists headed for Canaan Valley’s ski resorts and state parks. (Tourists account for approximately 70 percent of sales.) The seasonal economy brings slower periods in winter and early spring, giving Williams and his staff downtime to experiment with roasting methods, brewing techniques and new drink ideas.

When you’re in the café, it’s not unusual to spot office and retail store workers mingling with mountain bikers, snowboarders, students and retirees. It’s visible evidence that Hypnocoffee caters to a regional market that had been under-served. Even larger neighboring towns, such as Oakland, Md., about 20 miles north, or Elkins, W. Va., 30 miles south of Davis, offer nothing resembling a micro-roastery that serves high-quality espresso.

Hypnocoffee opened in January 2008, and the early years have



been encouraging. Williams reports growth rates that would please many small-business owners: After grossing \$45,000 in first-year sales, Hypnocoffee took in roughly \$100,000 in the second year as café business, Web-based sales and wholesale activity surged. Williams says current-year sales projections call for another 40 percent jump.

Williams roasts nearly daily in a small Diedrich IR3 roaster perched on a counter near a single-group Conti espresso machine, and he says he'll need to add a larger roaster this year to meet demand. The company plans to remain relatively small, however: Williams says he will roast between 10,000 and 15,000 pounds of coffee this year, keeping Hypnocoffee squarely in the micro-roaster category.

'Education is paramount'

Williams purchases beans from two coffee importers, Café Imports in Minneapolis and Café Lobo in New Orleans. Partnering with such established wholesalers and securing strong industry training are cornerstones of the business plan he began plotting well before opening Hypnocoffee's doors. The Hypnocoffee team benefits from barista training through Counter Culture Coffee's Regional Training Center in Washington, D.C., and wholesale partners have provided significant guidance in purchasing. Williams says those practices have been key to the company's early success. "We took a page right out of the Counter Culture playbook," he says. "Education is paramount to what we do."

Café Imports, based in St. Paul, Minn., began working with Hypnocoffee in July 2009 to source specialty coffees from major coffee-growing regions. Noah Namowicz, who handles sales and

marketing duties for the importer, helps Williams find and select coffees. Namowicz says Williams began buying one bag of raw beans every month last year and now places orders for three to five bags monthly as sales have jumped. "Tony is one of those guys who really wants to learn a lot about the coffees that we have coming in," Namowicz says. "We'll give him a heads-up on what coffees are available. It's important if you have a relationship with a partner who works directly with growers and co-ops in different countries."

Last November, Hypnocoffee hosted its own in-house barista throwdown. It featured top barista Cade Archuleta, part-time barista Cory Chase and Summer, who helps out at the shop. Regular customers attended the event to judge the best drinks and enjoy samples. "Summer actually won," Archuleta says. "She had a delicate hand with the rosetta in her latte art."

Other recent events at Hypnocoffee included a holiday-themed "Make Your Own Damn Drink" night in December, which drew 16 local fans of the café and gave them a chance to try their hands at making coffee drinks behind the bar. The evening included one-on-one instructions for pulling espresso shots, building milk-based drinks and learning latte art skills. Guests also learned about cupping and how to sample different blends and single origins.

Another outreach effort: blogging. Regular online posts have extended the conversation with regular customers and the local business community. Williams and guest posters—usually Archuleta and Chase—discuss coffee very little in their blog posts, choosing instead to focus on personal news, stories and photo journals of family travel, plus phony reports on customers and current events that wouldn't be out of place in *The Onion*. Posts are so popular that Williams often receives story pitches from readers.

continued on page 87

Approaching change

At its core, the business strategy Williams has implemented emphasizes quality coffee drinks, beans and service. That focus is visible in a recent shift at Hypnocoffee, which found Williams and his team transitioning away from large drip brewers to smaller press pots for all non-espreso brewing. Williams decided to offer guests a coffee selection he believes works more effectively with press pot brewing. Some customers who hadn't tried press pot brewing were surprised by the fine residue at the bottom of their cups. Others warmed quickly to the new method. Williams says the change offered another approach to sharing the craft of fine coffees and exposing customers to something new. "It elevates the coffee experience and also reduces expense for me," he says. "That means better coffee and profitability."



Meanwhile, guests order plenty of espresso shots as well as cortados, cappuccinos and other milk-based drinks. Commercial sales and the shop's mail-order business also continue to rise, so Williams is looking beyond the local horizon to chart new growth plans. He plans to move the roasting operation away from the current retail spot and open a new facility that better accommodates higher production.

But why would anyone consider leaving such a picturesque setting? Williams says it's about shipping. The freight costs behind every bag of beans delivered to Davis—plus the charges to ship every order for out-of-town customers—lowers margins. Limited road access, especially in winter, restricts the few freight suppliers that serve the area. "Shipping is a growing issue as the roasting business takes off," says Williams. "It's killing me."

That's one reason why Tony and Summer plan to steer Hypnocoffee into the future at a new location elsewhere in the region (it'll be closer to interstate highways). The couple has been researching sites for a dedicated roasting facility and business office. They hope to settle this summer in Shepherdstown, a quaint community in West Virginia's eastern panhandle near Washington, D.C. The municipality is also attractive as a new family home offering quality schools for their three children, who range in age from one to 12.

Hypnocoffee's third year may be its most eventful as the business continues to grow. What won't change is its place in the Davis community, where the current café will continue to bring tourists and locals together around high-quality coffees. ☪

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