

Yes, coffee lovers, there is a

Phil



Philz Coffee takes Redwood City: One Cup at a Time

"I built my business on three things," says Phil Jabar, the founder of the Bay Area-born Philz coffee enterprise. "Faith, trust, and love." And while this is true, there's one thing he might add to that list:

Patience.

By Karen Macklin

We're sitting in the break room of his flagship coffee shop in the San Francisco Mission district, the first Philz Coffee. Since its opening in 2003 the shop has become a San Francisco cultural touchstone — this Wednesday morning, people of all walks of life, hipsters in skinny jeans, suited-up business folk, uniformed cops and plugged-in techies, are queuing up for their made-to-order morning brew. But this scene is no longer reserved only for San Francisco. Philz now exists in 22 locations throughout California, with one of its newest locations opening last month on Broadway in Redwood City. Jabar will tell you that all of this success did not happen overnight. The tiny break room that is the Mission District Philz was not a break room in 1974, when Jabar first opened a corner store in this space. At the time it was Jabar's walk-in refrigerator.

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The new Redwood City Philz Coffee shop on 2116 Broadway.

Jabar has been interested in coffee for as long as he can remember. As a boy growing up in the West Bank Palestinian city of Ramallah, Jabar began to notice the way that coffee brought people together and created community. "I used to see my grandmother and the neighbors get together and talk for hours over coffee," he says. "I realized when I was 8 years old that coffee was a social thing." He soon went to work in a coffee house where he helped clean up in exchange for apprenticing a coffee maker. It was then he decided he would one day open a coffee shop.

Jabar immigrated to the East Bay city of Alameda at age 12. He had planned to spend his first two years at Merritt College after graduating from Alameda High School, but after only one day of college he received news that a centrally located San Francisco storefront had become available for rent. He jumped at the opportunity. "I didn't want to go to college," he recalls. "I wanted to work and make money."

He chose to open a store in San Francisco, he says, because the city is a compact seven by seven miles in size, and, when it comes to business, it's best to start small.

"Back then, you could go all over this city in an hour," he says. "So, if I could earn a good reputation (in the Mission), everybody would know about me." He ran the space as Gateway Market, a convenience store that sold liquor, beer, various household items, and other brands of fresh coffee. In the span of 25 years at the location he developed a reputation as a solid community man who sold affordable goods. He never lost his urge to make his own coffee brand, however. Though he worked on creating his own coffee, he never shared the ambition with anyone; he was waiting until he perfected it.

In 1998, Jabar took two years off from his business to travel the world and visit more than 1,100 coffee shops. He drank coffee, watched people and took notes on customer and employee satisfaction. "Customers were standing in line like they were going to a medical office," he says about other coffee shops he observed. "They weren't smiling. And they weren't getting a good cup of coffee."

On his return he continued to fine-tune his blends and occasionally shared samples with people in his inner circle. Finally, in 2003, he went all in, converting the market into Philz Coffee. As rave reviews came in, he slowly started to ex-



pand within San Francisco, then to the South Bay and on to Los Angeles. His next location: Washington, DC. (Because, he says, it's only 6 by 7 miles.)

Numerous businesses carry his coffee, from Twitter headquarters to Whole Foods to Virgin America. The success is great, but Jabar remains most passionate about the way his coffee brings people together.

"I'm not a coffee shop, I'm a community," says Jabar. He sits in his flagship store at a kitchen breakfast table; it's the same

one he brought to this shop from his home because he didn't have enough money to furnish the place. He is pleased it functions as a community table, just as it did in his home. "At home, we would eat here standing up," he says with a laugh.

Jabar emphasizes that Philz only hires local people and provides employees a good salary with health and dental benefits. To work for Jabar, you needn't have an impressive resume of sophisticated macchiato-making exploits. You do need to be enthusiastic, courteous, and hard working. And, of course, you need to love Philz coffee. The rest, he says, can be learned in the coffee school he created with his son, Jacob. The 20-day training program immerses new employees in the culture of Philz, teaches intricacies of coffee recipes and emphasizes the art of hospitality. "You must have values, morals, and respect," he says. "I don't have employees. I have people, culture, a team."

Jabar is a family man, and that means not only putting his family first, but also keeping the business in the family. His oldest daughter, Gina, is a doctor. "I told her to become a doctor in case I went broke," he says. His second daughter, Jessica, is his real estate agent. And his son, Jacob, became Chief Executive Officer of the company 10 years ago at the age of 18. Jacob has been instrumental in the expansion of Philz Coffee. "He's my boss, my oxygen, my best friend," says Jabar. "I wouldn't trade him for a country." Jacob was also the inspiration for one of Jabar's signature blends: Jacob's Wonderbar.

Jabar calls himself a "humble lion". He prides himself equally on being a sociable community figure devoted to the people he serves and also on being a no-nonsense businessman. He knows loyal customers made him who he is today so he is loyal in

return, aiming to keep coffee prices as low as possible while maintaining the highest quality possible. A coffee at Philz can be had for \$3 and you don't pay for it unless you taste, and like, it. He also knows that the recipe to his success has included a relentlessly can-do attitude, and a dose of healthy ambition. "Other people dream," he says with a glint in his eye and knowing smile. "I don't dream. I go get the dream. People climb ladders. I don't climb ladders. I own the ladder."

Jabar spent seven years developing and perfecting his first coffee blend, Tesora, and through years of experimentation learned how to take most of the acid out of the coffee and thus easy to digest. In any Philz, you'll find a cadre of skilled baristas who can advise, depending on your taste, what coffee will best suit you that day, whether it be a dark roast Code 33 with hints of apple and nut flavor or a Dancing Water with notes of chocolate and cinnamon. Do not expect a long list of specialty drinks like cappuccinos or lattes. Coffee is kept simple and straight up at Philz with just a few exceptions, such as his signature Mint Mojito Iced Coffee. Bay Area Yelpers and word-of-mouthers have made Mint Mojito Iced Coffee legendary.

Jabar says he chose Redwood City for one of his newest stores because it's still one of the more affordable places on the Peninsula and is an up-and-coming hot spot. Eventually, he'd like to write a book about his life and his coffee. "I can't tell you how good it is," he says, referring to the community support he's garnered that has brought the success he enjoys. "But it can happen to anybody if you treat people with love and integrity." And, one might add, if you know how to make one heck of a cup of coffee. **C**