

A Hill of Beans

Michael Thibodeau's Just Breathe Coffee Company is Poised to become the Roast of the
Town
by
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Many talk a good game in Flint. It's easy to decide what the city needs or business ideas over a pint or two on a Friday night. Most of those ideas die at last call, killed by the lights coming up and the last shot going down. But a change is brewing. The area is beginning to see a groundswell of new entrepreneurs with fresh ideas and strong ties to the city, coupled with the determination to make their living, and their lives, in the city. Add Michael Thibodeau to that list.

"For the past few years I've been screaming about the potential in Flint. I finally decided to shut up and start doing it. I was tired of just talking. That's my advice—quit talking and do it. Stop wasting energy talking. Just move forward. That's the way things happen. They can move more quickly than you might imagine," he said.

Thibodeau did decide to stop talking and start doing, and now he is ready to launch his Just Breathe coffee roasting business at the Farmer's Market on May 1. The opening is the culmination of 10 years of working in coffee houses, planning, becoming a "professional coffee snob," and developing an identity and niche to achieve his dream. He knew he wanted to be a business owner from his high school years spent hanging out in coffee shops. For Thibodeau, Just Breathe is ultimately about how coffee can be a social lubricant.

"Coffee opens doors. It makes people comfortable to talk. In coffee houses, I talked with people I would have even met if I wasn't hanging out there. Coffee is a great way to meet new people."

Thibodeau found inspiration to act from other local business owners, but he's known since high school that he needed to be his own boss.

"I have to own my own business. I don't like working for The Man. I have always felt a need to create my own box," he said. "My generation saw the rise of coffee shops and coffee culture, but we don't have a company to call our own."

And the niche Thibodeau's "Rock and Roll Coffee Company" aspires to fill. The coffees are named in tribute to Thibodeau's favorite musicians. Opening weekend blends include "Coffee for the Morning After," named after a Pete Yorn album. "Fire without a Spark" references Bruce Springsteen. "Flint Rock City" and "A Coffee Named Sue" are nods to Kiss and Johnny Cash. He's excited about working with local bands to create signature roasts as well.

“I think there is a huge possibility for bands to sell unique merchandise. I mean, how many bands have their own coffees?” he said. “If someone wants to work with me about developing a blend for their band or their family, I’ll do it. I’m open to working with my customers in any way I can.”

The company name came from his brother’s graphic design work. Thibodeau was labeling coffee bags at Good Beans Café when he imagined coffee bags adorned with his brother’s art. He pitched the idea to his brother, whose graphic design company was going to be called Just Breathe. Thibodeau’s brother agreed to give him the name, and Just Breathe coffee roasting was born.

Even Thibodeau’s business strategy is influenced by music. He is running Just Breathe as most bands operate, with all profit going back into the company. Plans are underway to add a street team, and other traditional band merchandise such as stickers, buttons, and t-shirts. The company website should be up in a couple months.

“Right now, this is basically a huge hobby. I don’t plan to make any money from it in the near future. My goal is to build up capital through retail first,” he said. He eventually wants to grow into a coffee house from the bean roasting business.

This “old traditions, new attitudes” approach should appeal to both the coffee enthusiasts and young people who are trying their first cup. Helping people learn and adding to his own knowledge base about coffee are high on his list of priorities. He is looking forward to meeting the public at the Farmer’s Market.

“That’s the great thing about coffee. No one knows everything. If you want to come up and talk coffee, that’s great. I’ll talk your ear off. If there’s something you want to know, we’ll look into it. That’s how I learned what I know, talking to people and reading books,” he said. “I want to appeal to long-time specialty coffee drinkers and people who don’t know they like it yet. That’s one of the best things about this, educating people.”

Thibodeau buys his beans from a broker based in St. Paul, Minnesota. Although he didn’t seek out a small business specifically, he is happy about his choice.

“I didn’t seek out a small company on purpose, but I am glad that I wound up with one. When I call, people know me there. They haven’t lost sight of what made them start the business in the first place,” he said.

A company with blend names based on songs and with bag labels created by local artists might draw in the younger crowd, but the specialty coffee crowd may not be bowled over by rock and roll coffee names and the Just Breathe logo, which is a gas mask with a coffee mug attached. Thibodeau is planning on drawing them in by their noses.

“People will stop when they smell the coffee. They’ll see that I have high quality roasting equipment, that I know what I’m doing. Interaction will take care of it,” he said.

“Knowing my trade and knowing my customers will bring them back. If you want to talk about coffee I can do that. If you want to talk about the art on the bags, I can do that. If you want to talk about movie or music, I can do that, too.”

Thibodeau is not worried about the imminent invasion of chain coffee shops, or about the area competition. He feels a sense of community with other local coffee businesses.

“The chains are circling. Local businesses need to work together. I would like to see us come together to broaden our knowledge. At the same time, my coffee is at market price. It will compete against Starbucks or other competitors. I stand behind my coffee, and I will compete with anyone,” he said.

Although Thibodeau is a self-proclaimed “coffee snob,” and he advises people to “not take his coffee home if they’re not going to take care of it,” he is first and foremost a coffee lover. It all comes back to the social element.

“I will sit in a coney island around town and drink coffee all night, but I truly enjoy my specialty coffee. There is a difference between a ‘coffee drinker’ and a ‘specialty coffee drinker,’ but I don’t care which one you are,” he said. “I want you to stop by. I want to talk. I want to turn the coffee business, and Flint, on its ear.”