



The Rowster Experience

by Jerel Domer

Rowster is an unusual coffee shop, even by coffee shop standards. Usually, when you walk into a locally owned Grand Rapids café, whether it's The Kava House, Sparrows, or The Bitter End, you have some idea of what to expect; you know it won't look like everywhere else, but you also expect it to conform to ordinary coffee shop standards: soft, ambient lighting, hip baristas, walls adorned with eclectic artwork, and classic indie-alternative tunes

floating quietly over people's heads as they hunch over their textbooks and laptops. Against these typical features, Rowster stands out like an engineering student in the art department.

Entering the café, I had to take a moment to just adjust to the unexpected surroundings and make sure I had entered the right building. The first thing I noticed was that the baristas looked more like army cadets than hipsters, sporting simple, well-

ironed matching grey uniforms instead of striped shirts under earth-tone cardigans, beanies, and horn-rimmed glasses. Then I looked around the airy, brightly lit space and registered the metallic grey signs with blocky white letters, the product labels adorned with red five-point stars, the olive-drab armchairs, and the authentic 1960s typewriter perched on a bar table that ran the length of the front window.

My curiosity peaked, I walked over to the typewriter to examine it and was pleased to find that it worked; the heavy paper sticking out the top displayed the witty remarks and clever commentaries of previous customers. Then a voice called out from behind the counter, “That’s the same model typewriter that Bob Dylan used to write his songs.”

Seeking an explanation for the unusual décor, I approached the clean-cut young barista. “So do I need to be a veteran to buy coffee here?” He laughed and

shrugged. “No, it’s just this joke we had ...I dunno, it doesn’t really mean anything, we just thought it was funny.” I might not have gotten the joke, but that was ok. The important thing was that despite my initial skepticism, I found Rowster to be a diamond-in-the-rough café, a great blend of high-quality product with a vibe that was refreshingly different.

Beyond its army-esque appearance, Rowster boasted a number of unique characteristics that set it apart from places like Sparrows and The Bitter End (two popular locally owned cafés here in Grand Rapids). For one, you get to see the entire roasting and brewing process in action in a way that makes you feel involved, more than just another customer waiting for your drink. The far wall is lined with massive burlap sacks that look like they just got dropped off by a helicopter from the farms of Costa Rica. They are full of freshly imported, straight-from-the-source coffee beans

emitting the powerful fragrance of Latin American quality.

The sacks are emptied into the roaster, a giant furnace-like machine that stands tall behind the counter, clanking happily as it churns the beans with a great spinning tumbler. The roasted beans are then crushed with state-of-the-art grinders and dispersed either to the counter for brewing or to the shelf for wholesale. You see all of this as a sort of real-time narration of how your drink is made, and you can tell just by watching (and smelling) that the ingredients are the very best.

In addition to passing cups over the counter, Rowster sells its grounds to many Grand Rapids businesses both local and corporate, with whom Rowster has developed close ties through their desire to be a dependable supplier of top-quality coffee. Though Rowster is also a member of Local First, a national organization that works to protect micro-businesses from

giant corporations that would try to buy them out or drive them out of business. Buying coffee from Rowster not only helps them to establish themselves as a go-to Grand Rapids café, but also supports a very worthwhile cause to keep places like Rowster alive.

I learned all this from Kurt Stauffer, the C.O. of Rowster who was only too happy to answer my questions and have a good chat. When asked about the origins of Rowster, he explained that he had been working in the back room of another local café, experimenting with different methods of roasting and brewing until he decided that he wasn't getting enough attention (and business) for his ideas. He needed a place of his own to spread out and bring his experiments to life, so he opened Rowster in July of 2010 and set to work creating a place that he intended to become something entirely new.

He was remarkably successful in doing just that. If Rowster's methods of production are unique, they are nothing to the philosophy behind them. The more you talk to Stauffer, the more you realize he has no intention of being "just another coffee shop"; he wants people to actually *experience* Rowster as opposed to treating it like a small library with good coffee. He wants people to come and enjoy a new scene that offers something completely different; to quote Stauffer, Rowster "breaks all the rules" of the average coffee shop, and they do it to offer their customers something new.

Toward this end, Rowster dedicates itself to producing only the best quality coffee, which is imported from small, high-end growers through special channels that allow for real attention to be paid to the product. "We have actual relationships with the farms," explains Stauffer as he pours a burlap sack of fresh beans into the giant grinder. Our primary objective is to sell

top-quality bags of coffee a new way, so there is depth behind what we do; we use research, design, and technique to produce quality. Everything we're doing is unique...we're not following anyone else's mold."

Eager to get a taste of this quality, I purchased a shot of espresso and an espresso mocha. The former packed a real punch and possessed a uniquely clean, sharp taste, the latter a similar sensation with the addition of a smooth, creamy steamed milk and rich chocolate. I might not be a coffee connoisseur, but like anyone with moderately developed taste buds, I know a good brew when I drink one.

To Stauffer, this "something more" he's after is, for a number of reasons, essential to Rowster's mission. The café focuses intensely on quality to avoid making the mistakes of many other local coffee shops, who, in his words, "make lower quality coffee because all they care about is

having the lowest prices.” Interestingly, Rowster’s prices are not noticeably higher than anywhere else, despite their great effort to produce a more quality product. Somehow, they are able to keep their quality high without the prices following suit.

Rowster’s mission to “make better coffee in a new way” allows them to compete with corporate enterprises that dominate the industry through omnipresence, flashy advertising and irresistible green aprons. Although these are certainly effective marketing strategies in today’s consumerist society, Kurt Stauffer

works for something a little simpler and maybe a little more meaningful: if he can sell a top-quality bag of coffee in a new, un-conforming and refreshingly eccentric way, he has something to offer too. While uniformity certainly has its uses, it is wonderful to get a taste of freshness, originality and genuine character. Rowster offers that refreshing taste, and their determination to succeed in their mission is boldly illustrated in their slogan: “The Coffee Revolution Begins on the Battleground.”