



on the horizon

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It is mid-day on a Monday, and Brad Penna, owner of Horizon Line Coffee, is not sitting behind a desk. He's not out to lunch. He's sifting through thousands of freshly-roasted coffee beans, looking for any imperfections and tossing out any he suspects aren't up to standard. Monitoring roasting temperatures and smelling beans to detect different notes, Penna wants to make sure his customers are receiving high quality coffee every time they visit his shop. Penna and his business partner, Nam Ho, graciously invited me 'behind the line' to chat and discover what makes Horizon Line Coffee unique and authentic.

Horizon Line Coffee (HLC) is a specialty coffee shop and roastery located in downtown Des Moines. HLC took form after Penna and Ho desired a change of pace from their daily lives. The pair devoted themselves to learning everything they could about coffee and soon moved from Los Angeles to Des Moines in order to make their dream a reality, opening HLC in the summer of 2017.

HLC is a specialty coffee shop that roasts and serves quality coffee to its customers. Penna said that with any sort of commodity, there's a niche community that says, 'we can do better.' HLC prides itself on being a part of that community.

"For specialty grade coffee ... it's picked better, it's sorted better," Penna said. "It's basically filtered better and then it's roasted, like micro roasting with higher attention to detail, and really working to bring out the nuances in that particular coffee. So, where it's grown, how it's processed, altitude, all those things. Also, attention to detail in the roasting process, and then attention to detail in the brewing process."

Staff members are encouraged to brainstorm and test drink ideas in their kitchens or at the shop. The ideas that succeed often make the menu.

HLC offers a variety of drink options, with menus for seasonal lattes, teas, pour-over coffee and mocktails. Their fall drink menu includes a salted caramelized fig latte, a spicy espresso mocktail and a cold brew cider. I personally enjoy either the Saigon tea or their Ethiopia natural processed pour over when I visit.

The distinct menu items and quality coffee aren't the only things that keep customers coming back. Penna and Ho strive to create an environment within their shop that's welcoming and accepting of everyone, no matter their knowledge or experience with coffee.

"What we try to do here is we try to ask people's names, and we try to have conversations with people if they want to have them," Ho said. "Obviously, we want to meet people where they're at. So, having more conversations and making more friendships, I'm making more here than I honestly expected."

HLC has developed a sense of community that can be seen from the moment you walk in the front door. It's obvious that facilitating relationships and treating customers with kindness is a top priority. The employees at HLC would love to explain to you the brewing process for a pour-over, or simply chat with you about your day.

Mia Mayland is a regular at HLC.

"Basically, ever since I started going there I've always felt really welcomed," Mayland said. "I've felt as if though who I am as a person whether good or bad, it didn't make a difference walking in there. The staff and the people who work there are just really kind and actually care about the customers that walk through the door."

Ultimately, Ho said they strive to create a space that facilitates the type of coffee conversations the two colleagues would have when living in California.

Ho also takes pride in the opportunity to create careers for HLC employees and encourages their creative processes through that. Whether it's through photography, art or design, they strive to be a place that gives life to the work that staff members create.

"We are always thinking of ways, how can we improve? Stagnation is something that I'm always very worried about," Ho said. In the past few years, Horizon Line has continued to keep its customers on their toes, whether it's through switching up décor, changing the seasonal menu, adding a mural on the back wall or, most recently, introducing a reusable glass program.

Since opening, HLC has always strived to be environmentally responsible by working with companies like Ecocare Supply, who provide eco-friendly paper cups and towels. Over this past year, they still felt like they were producing a lot of waste. After chatting with Bar Nine in Los Angeles, HLC decided to make a significant change, affecting their customers and their workflow.

In August, HLC switched from using single-use paper and plastic cups to glass jars. The goal? That customers would bring their glass jar back, reducing waste and having a healthier impact on the environment.

"You can be environmentally conscious as a person, and you can bring your to go cup places, but it's never the shop that's supplying them or making it easier for the consumer," Ho said. "So with that mindset, we're the ones supplying, producing the waste and creating the waste. Why shouldn't we be the ones responsible for eliminating it?"

As a business, HLC wants to equip its customers with what they need in order to be environmentally conscious.



Since implementing their reusable glass jars, other coffee shops like Oddly Correct in Kansas City and Amateur Coffee in Omaha have switched to the trend.

Horizon Line genuinely cares deeply about the work they're doing, the relationships they're building and the products they're creating.

"I joke around with people and I'm like, 'We have a super simple business plan,'" Penna said. "I'm like, 'make excellent coffee and work to be nice to people,' and it sounds so simple, but it's like, some of the simplest things are always evolving, always becoming better."

With this simple business plan, HLC continues to create a lasting impact on its customers, the environment and Des Moines.