

secrets



One in a series
of coffeehouse
success stories.

OSLO COFFEE BROOKLYN, N.Y.

A small sign in the shape of a coffee cup hangs over the entrance to Oslo Coffee Roasters, the only hint that inside it's all about the bean.

Oslo is a coffee institution in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., an area now packed with cafés, but owners J.D. Merget and wife Kathy were unlikely pioneers when they opened this location on Roebling Street in September of 2003. "It was my dream to roast coffee and work with coffee, but not to run and do the whole thing," says J.D. Merget.

J.D. has spent his entire career in wholesale coffee, beginning as a delivery driver for Starbucks in Seattle, but it was Kathy, then an art teacher, who suggested they open a café and roaster.

It took the couple a year and a half of looking—and discovering Manhattan commercial real estate was too expensive—before they found this space in a brand new building, across from a public school. They designed and built the interior themselves, with help from friends, based on Merget's industry experience.

"I looked at the coffee shops I helped open and worked with and saw which ones were successful and which ones weren't successful," he says.

On the outside, the café shares the same blue windows and doors as its retail neighbors on the ground floor of a generic light brown brick apartment building, but the inside is large and bright, the front wall all window, which can completely open for warm weather.

There's an antique Royal typewriter on the communal table at the front of the store, but laptops, a Williamsburg café staple, are few and far between. There's no Wi-Fi or even electrical outlets at Oslo, a decision made to keep the vibe sociable.

"We prefer that you sit and meet and talk to people," says Merget. The crowd at Oslo runs from parents with strollers to local freelancers and artists, although it's developed a morning commuter rush as more office professionals moved into the area.

Oslo now has two more stores, one on nearby Bedford Avenue and one in Manhattan's

BY DANIELLE BEURTEAUX

Yorkville neighborhood. Roebling Street isn't their busiest in terms of foot traffic, but Merget is glad they opened there first.

"It was a good learning curve," he says. "It took us two or three years to really get going at this location."

Roebling boasts a brand new La Marzocco Strada espresso machine, but the other Oslos have La San Marco Levas. They both make great coffee, Merget says, but he professes a soft spot for the old-fashioned Leva: "The variances in the Leva sometimes make a better shot because they can't be reproduced."

The Mergets do everything themselves, from bookkeeping to hiring, and—J.D.'s true passion—roasting. "Roasting is one of the biggest challenges I ever had," he says. "I thought it would be much easier."

A few blocks north of the shop is the warehouse where they roast beans, and deliver to their own outlets and wholesale accounts. They use a 1980s Probat L12 that roasts 20 pounds at a time. Oslo sells and serves 1,200 pounds of beans a week. Originally, they planned to roast in the store, but the city couldn't figure out how to permit the roasting.

They mostly piggyback their orders with brokers, but are also now working with a new New York-based organization called the Coffee Collective, a group of 10 coffee shops, roasters, and importers that buys directly from coffee farmers. Their first was an El Salvador Himalayan, and they're looking at Ugandan and Nicaraguan as follow-ups. Each season, they release four new single origin roasts, and an employee designs a new logo and silk-screens bags.

What does it take to be a good roaster? "Love and understanding," jokes Merget. "Really, the whole deal is, you have to taste and taste and try and taste, and it's always a learning experience."

Fact Box

OWNER:

J.D. AND KATHY MERGET

EQUIPMENT:

LA MARZOCCO STRADA ESPRESSO
MACHINE; PROBAT L12 ROASTER;
MAZZER ROBUR-E GRINDER

WEB:

WWW.OSLOCOFFEE.COM

Oslo Coffee Roasters

133 Roebling St., Brooklyn, N.Y.

718-782-0332

Weekdays: 7 a.m.–6 p.m. (7 p.m. summers);

Weekends: 8 a.m.–6 p.m. (7 p.m. summers)