



◀ Launched in 2013, Waterbean Coffee has grown to include 20 locations.

Images: Unica.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Waterbean Coffee Founder Tony Vo on helping to establish a specialty scene in North Carolina and why he's remained loyal to one espresso machine manufacturer for more than a decade.

WHEN ENTREPRENEUR Tony Vo had the idea to open a coffee shop in Cornelius, North Carolina, in 2013, specialty coffee wasn't a familiar term in the area. Despite there not being an established market for high-grade coffee, Vo was determined to do something different.

"I always try to be as original as possible. If someone, or many people, are already trying to make something work, then you know the field is going to be difficult to break into," Vo tells *Global Coffee Report*.

"At the time, some of my family were in the restaurant business, but I was interested in specialty coffee and saw an opportunity for someone to do something different with it in the Lake Norman area."

After discussing the idea with his wife Annie, they came up with the name Waterbean, representing how a good cup of coffee requires only the right mixture of water and beans to get the best taste. When their venue opened in winter 2013, it was the first specialty coffee shop in the area to offer pourover, French press, AeroPress, and five espresso options.

At first, Vo says most of the locals didn't

know much about specialty coffee and were used to ordering the kind of drinks served in large café chains.

"In the beginning, our team had to spend a lot of time communicating to customers how we worked and what we offered. They would come in and try to order a venti macchiato. We had to explain we didn't do that and talk them through our espresso options, which range from medium to dark roasts," he says.

Despite offering a novel coffee concept to the people of Cornelius, Waterbean was a success and after just nine months Vo opened a sister venue in Huntersville.

"I had no idea if launching a specialty coffee shop here would work. With the first store, I thought I'd open it and see how it does, but I fell in love with the industry," he says.

"When we had opened the second venue in Huntersville, just five minutes from the first, I said to Annie that over the next 10 years I'd like to reach 10 venues, then I'd quit. It was a goal I never thought I'd hit. Eleven years on from the first opening, we're getting ready to launch our 20th location."

As Waterbean Coffee has grown, so has the specialty scene in North Carolina, and the brand now has a lot more competitors. While each Waterbean venue has been uniquely designed to reflect its local area and demographic, in 2017 Vo established a roastery to supply all the cafés with freshly roasted specialty-grade coffee and ensure consistency across the venues.

"Opening our own roastery was a big risk to take, but we knew it was the right kind of growth we needed for Waterbean," he says.

"Having our own roasts sets us apart from the competition. We're not using the same beans as anyone else and we have complete control over the quality. We now roast almost exclusively organic coffees, except for a few limited-edition releases each year."

Vo believes the key to the brand's success has been multifaceted, but says the most important factor to growing a profitable coffee shop group is capital.

"You can't grow if you don't have capital. Having the right funding is of the utmost importance," he says.

"After that, having the right staff and the best product is key to delivering a quality experience. Our team are like family to us,

and that's enabled us to grow rapidly. You can have the vision and the capital, but if you don't have the team to realise the ambition, it's not going to work."

Another element he believes has been crucial to the brand's accomplishments is consistency, something he says has been supported by Waterbean's long-term partnership with espresso machine manufacturer Unic.

First working on a Unic machine when he was learning the barista trade at Texas Coffee School in 2013, Vo has sworn by the espresso machine brand ever since. When he opened the first store, he installed a Stella di Caffè and rolled out the model in all his venues until 2018, when the new Stella Epic was released and installed across Waterbean's fleet.

"During my time at Texas Coffee School, I worked on a lot of different espresso machines, but I really enjoyed the Stella di Caffè and have used Unic machines ever since," he says.

"I love the Epic because it's simple and very easy to work on. It's also extremely reliable and doesn't require a lot of maintenance, which is essential when you're operating 20 different locations."

For Vo, the consistency the machine delivers is another crucial element to the success of his company.

"It's very important the quality of our

coffee remains consistent across our venues, so having a trustworthy espresso machine is key. A lot of our staff work at multiple venues too, therefore they need to be able to create the same high-quality beverage, wherever they are that day," he says.

"We train all our staff on the Epic machines – they're very simple to guide new baristas through the workflow."

Unic's US team have been at Waterbean's side over the past 11 years and have been an invaluable asset to Vo as the company has expanded.

"I couldn't have asked for a better company to partner with over the past decade," says Vo.

"If anything ever crops up with any of the machines, no matter what time of day, the Unic team are ready to help and ensure we get everything back in action as quickly as possible. The service they provide is incredible. They'll check in to see how we're doing and when events like the Specialty Coffee Expo come around they'll invite us along.

"There aren't a lot of companies that go the extra mile for you like the team at Unic."

Not only smashing but almost doubling his original goal, Vo plans to continue to grow Waterbean – albeit at a slower pace.

"Five years ago, growth was my only focus, but for the next few years I want to slow it down a bit. We've just had our biggest year to

date, opening five new locations, including our first drive-thru," he says.

"Going forward, I'd like to explore wholesale and retail. I'm very focused on quality, so the idea of just anyone making our coffee makes me a bit nervous, but it would be cool to see Waterbean Coffee in other venues and grocery stores."

He's also confident the specialty coffee market in the US will continue to grow, with more consumers turning away from large national chains.

"Local, family-run coffee shops will continue to succeed and provide a unique experience. It's not just about the product – you also need good service, a friendly team, and a comforting environment," he says.

"Not everyone wants to grab a coffee and go. Many people want somewhere to relax and take some time out of their day to forget about what else is going on in their lives. At a time when most coffee shops focus on getting the customers in and out of their doors as quickly as possible, we try to give them a place to relax, hold meetings, go over school work, or just hang out with friends. We want to be more than just another coffee shop." **GCR**

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