

# How I Started My Coffee Business

*Origin story and development of Hippie Coffee*

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I was working in my family business, Fame Beverage, a small beer and wine distributorship in Canton, Ohio, named after the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The business had been started in 1932 and, over the years, grew with the rise of imported beers and craft beers. It was a family enterprise built by my grandfather Nathan, my father James, my uncle Jerrold, and later me. I became president of the company in 1998.

Nancy Rosengard was one of my top salespeople. She later left to go work at Caruso's Coffee in Cleveland, where she became one of their sales managers. That is where she learned about a Costa Rican coffee called La Minita, which she described as some of the best coffee in the world. She told me it was a single-estate, hard bean, high-quality Arabica coffee and encouraged me to learn more about it.

I already had a strong connection to Costa Rica because I had served in the Peace Corps there from 1981 to 1984. One of my closest friends from that time, Humberto Hernandez, is Costa Rican and comes from the Los Santos region, specifically Santa Maria de Dota, an area well known for producing exceptional coffee.

When I told Humberto about Nancy's comments regarding La Minita, he immediately understood the significance. He suggested that we go directly to the source and speak with the leaders of the coffee cooperative in his region in Dota to learn more about the coffee and its origins.

When we met with the manager there, I learned something surprising: La Minita was already well known in the United States, but much of the coffee associated with that brand was closely tied to the quality and production coming from their operation. That conversation sparked my interest even more.

I began bringing small bags of their coffee back with me and selling them casually to friends. Their reaction was immediate and enthusiastic. People would taste it and say, 'Oh my God, this is great coffee.' Around 2004, specialty coffee was not nearly as popular or widespread as it is today, which made that response even more meaningful.

## **Building the Brand**

By 2007, the climate in the beer business was changing because of the shifting relationship among the three major brewers, and we decided it was the right time to sell the family business. I sold the business in April 2007. I was about 50 years old, still young enough to build something new, and I knew I wanted to begin a new chapter. In 2006, I had visited New Belgium Brewery in Fort Collins, Colorado, with my friend David Black. I loved the concept of the brewery. The culture felt creative, fun, and completely different, with a playful atmosphere that made a lasting impression on me.

That experience inspired the word 'Hippie' in the brand name. After selling my business, I decided to revisit the coffee idea Nancy had introduced to me and see whether Caruso's Coffee could help produce coffee for me. At that time, I was dating my now wife, and she was very into

coffee. Together with Sir John Lane of the Winking Lizard, my friend Jeremy Fisher, Dominic Caruso, and me, we sat down and started tasting and cupping coffees.

From the beginning, we wanted to focus on coffees from the Los Santos area of Costa Rica. That was the region that had impressed me the most, and it became the foundation of what would eventually become Hippy Coffee.

### **Key Early Decisions**

- Use the Hippy Coffee name to reflect a relaxed, authentic, and memorable brand identity.
- Work with Caruso's Coffee as the roasting and production partner.
- Source coffee connected to the Los Santos region of Costa Rica.
- Build the company around quality first, even before specialty coffee became mainstream in many markets.

### **Launching in Costa Rica and the United States**

In 2007, I moved to Costa Rica and started the coffee company in Playa del Coco. I opened a small coffee store there at a time when the local market was still ahead of the trend - people were not yet as interested in paying for high-end, high-quality coffee the way they are now.

At the same time, I started selling the coffee into grocery stores in the United States, mostly in Ohio. The business did not develop as quickly as I thought it might. Shelf space in grocery stores was difficult to secure, and premium coffee had not yet become a strong mass-market product in the way it would later become.

Even so, the coffee did find loyal buyers. Gourmet shops liked it, individual customers appreciated the quality, and to this day people still continue to buy it. That ongoing support has kept the business alive and has shown me that the product itself has always been strong.

### **A Family Business**

Today, my son Paul is running and operating the business and handling the distribution and sales. He picks up the coffee at Caruso's, takes the orders, and mails them out. That makes Hippy Coffee a very personal family business built on relationships, trust, and hands-on involvement.

### **Looking Forward**

Today, I still use Caruso's Coffee to produce and roast the coffee for me, and they remain an important gourmet coffee brokerage and production partner. Although the business never scaled as quickly as I originally hoped, the rise of internet sales, changing consumer tastes, and the increased appreciation for premium coffee have created a new opportunity.

My goal now is to finally get Hippy Coffee moving the way I always believed it could. The original idea was built on genuine relationships, Costa Rican coffee expertise, and a real love for exceptional coffee. Those same strengths still define the business today.