



## — IDEAS FOR — "giving back" IN THE COFFEE INDUSTRY

Suspended coffee originated in the Italian city of Naples during the hard times of post war Europe. Noted for their civil solidarity in the face of things like earthquakes and war, the citizens of Naples found a way of making sure everyone, even the poor and homeless, could enjoy the daily ritual of coffee drinking, by then well entrenched in Italian culture. It's a simple pay-it-forward program. How it works is that someone pays for two coffees, drinks one, and leaves one prepaid for someone who can't afford to buy one.

It soon caught on with the homeless of Naples, who were welcomed into local cafés to partake in the generosity and kindness of their fellow citizens. The idea later spread to other cities around the world - where it has thrived on and off, as hard times have come and gone.

Today there are websites and Facebook groups and even associations devoted entirely to "suspended coffee" - such as the Suspended Coffee Society in some of Australia's capital cities.

During our travels around the globe, I've seen suspended coffee signs on local café doors and jars with suspended coffee written on labels, inviting customers to leave donations matching the price of a coffee.

In Naples, it seemed as much a part of life in Gambrinus, a 160 year old historical café, as it was in the many simple cafés dotted throughout the city. At Gambrinus you will see a very large

version of a Neapolitana, the little stovetop device for making coffee in Neapolitan homes, where a customer can pop in a second docket for a suspended coffee (in Italian, a "caffè sospeso") from which a person in need can pull out a docket and give it to the barista. Based on honesty and trust; no questions asked; it seemed to work.

I didn't think much about the logistics of such a program, until one day a local café owner in Brisbane said she had abandoned the idea when, once too often, the entire suspended coffee jar "went missing".

After recently hearing Michelle Bou-Samra speak on her own suspended coffee program at one of our Women in Coffee gatherings in Brisbane, I realised there's much more to suspended coffee than simply hanging a sign on the door or sticking a label on a jar.

At Thrive on George, her café in Brisbane's CBD, Michelle has implemented the most

successful suspended coffee program I've ever seen. With a simple three-pronged approach, she has set up a system that's ironed out all the possible glitches. It involves promoting the right culture among team members and customers and dealing with the issues of sustainability and transparency.

Michelle has kindly allowed me to explain her system to other café owners keen to get a successful suspended coffee program in place.

Firstly, to promote the culture of social equity among her team, she aims to employ those with understanding and empathy and leads the way herself by engaging with her homeless customers, who may live in the laneways behind her café. She believes it's more than putting a coffee in their hands and sending them on their way. Respect is at the core. She explains, "It's enquiring about their wellbeing, just as you would anyone else you were concerned about, or allowing them to use the toilet, the most



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basic of human rights." Treating them differently is not part of the culture at Thrive on George. She realises, however, not all those she has employed have been able to embrace such a culture and are encouraged to move on.

Michelle said it was easy to get her customers involved, as 90% of them are regulars she has built a rapport with over eight years. Clearly they admire and respect what she is doing and trust her with the money they donate. And it's tangible. Her customers see coffees they've paid for being redeemed in front of them every day. Michelle believes in the innate desire people have to "do good for others" and has provided an easy, hassle free system for them to do so. Michelle explains too that it was actually one of her customers who suggested she implement the program.

Secondly, she has been careful to ensure her system is transparent, with proper record keeping. She gives customers a variety of ways to donate, and everything is registered through her point of sale system. A suspended coffee (and food as is the case at Thrive on George) can be rung up on the specific keys on the point of sale, just like any other sale. Customers can also donate from their loyalty card, which is again rung up on a specific key on the point of sale. Or they can donate loose coins into a box,

which Michelle personally tallies and enters under the suspended items in the point of sale. When a suspended product is redeemed, there are also relevant keys on the point of sale.

Michelle says, "Everything is accounted for and recorded." She also posts updates of the tally of donations and redemptions on her website and a board in the café.

Thirdly, with regard to sustainability, Michelle believes questions like, "What if at times demand is greater than the donations?" needs to be considered prior to starting the program. Michelle made the decision that, when this happens, she would cover the difference herself. And with proper record keeping, she's able to keep an eye on everything and know exactly what part of her profit she's personally donating to charity. Having the tally on the Facebook page also inspires her Facebook friends to connect with the program - especially when donations are needed to keep up with demand.

Should you be inspired to follow Michelle's lead, to find out more information, you can go to [www.thriveongorge.com](http://www.thriveongorge.com) or [www.facebook.com/thriveongorge](http://www.facebook.com/thriveongorge)

You would be forgiven for thinking that Michelle has done more than her fair share of giving back in the coffee industry. But there's more to Michelle Bou-Samra's drive

to help others. As well as running Thrive on George, she's a practicing pharmacist and pharmacy consultant who, with one of her dear friends, has set up the Fullife Foundation which partners with World Vision to sponsor 205 Ethiopian children in the Samre Area Development Project, making it World Vision's largest single sponsor in Australia. The Fullife Foundation is also the largest single sponsor of birthing kits, that each costs a customer less than most coffees. Consisting of a plastic sheet, gauze, scalpel, string, soap and gloves, this simple kit helps to reduce deaths of mothers and/or infants at birth enormously. The Fullife Foundation is also involved in healthcare and education.

To learn about the great work done by Fullife, go to [www.fullife.com.au/](http://www.fullife.com.au/) [fullife-foundation](http://fullife-foundation) or [www.facebook.com/fullifefoundation](http://www.facebook.com/fullifefoundation)

All in all, Michelle Bou-Samra is one impressive Woman in Coffee, who is making a massive difference to the lives of people in need.

**CONTRIBUTORS:**

**STORY** by Christine Cottrell, author of the *Barista Bible* and *Perfect Espresso* training system. **CONTACT:** 0407 021 220 or [christine@perfectespresso.com.au](mailto:christine@perfectespresso.com.au)

**IMAGES** by Annette Dutton, professional coffee photographer. **CONTACT:** 0410 128 030 or [annetteduttonphotography@gmail.com](mailto:annetteduttonphotography@gmail.com)