

EXECUTIVE Q&A | OMAR LOPEZ

Executive Q&A: Omar Lopez puts his Colombian coffee on wheels

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When Omar Lopez moved to Madison in 1999, he began looking for coffee that equaled that found in his hometown in Colombia.

Lopez never did find a coffee to his liking, but his efforts led him to start his own business, Cafe Social, that features coffee from his sister's coffee bean farm in the Andes Mountains.

Since 2011, Lopez and his business partner, Doug Swenson, have been distributing bags of coffee to more than 25 area grocery stores, including what now totals 15 Woodman's Markets in Wisconsin and northern Illinois. In addition, Lopez can be found at area farmers markets pouring cups of coffee. He uses a tent for his coffee stand at the Dane County Farmers' Market on Saturdays and a table at the indoor farmers market at Hilldale Shopping Center over the winter.

But at this time of the year on Wednesdays and Saturdays at Hilldale and Sundays in Monona, the Social Cafe is run out of an old mail truck that has been rigged with a sink and coffee makers. The yellow-and-brown vehicle with barely enough room for two workers sees a steady stream of customers.

Lopez has worked as a real estate agent and a tax preparer, mostly working with the Latino community. In Colombia, he was a civil engineer. An MBA from Edgewood College, a partnership with family back in Colombia and a full-time devotion to coffee have all helped Lopez succeed in Madison's highly competitive coffee market.

Q: Did you expect your business to grow to more than 25 stores and even have some coffee shops selling your bags of roasted coffee?

A: No, no. It really happened faster than I expected. And we have some possibilities to sell some of our coffee to Trinidad-Tobago and the islands in the Caribbean. We have

someone who is very interested in our coffee and we have someone in Los Angeles and possibly South Korea.

Q: How big is your sister's coffee farm?

A: I would say it's about 150 acres. So we have to buy from my sister, (her) neighbors, too, and from some relatives. Where I grew up is the core of the coffee production region. Everywhere is coffee. Around the whole town is coffee plants. It's nice. It's beautiful there.

Q: While you originally set out to bring coffee from Colombia for yourself, what convinced you to make it a business?

A: I wanted to have my own business, and I had finished my MBA. But I had to sell a product that I knew and had a product that was good. I wanted to bring good, quality coffee here that was rich but not bitter. I also wanted to help my sister improve her farm. Since we buy directly from her, she can pay better wages, too. That was the main reason. Now we have 12 employees that work directly with us at her farm. It's helping the economy in that area.

Q: There are scores of places in Madison to buy coffee beans, ground coffee and cups of coffee. How do you compete?

A: We don't have a middle man. We are really, really direct with my sister. We are really buying from the source and that's the reason we can compete. It's also a specialty coffee. It's not like mass-produced coffee. We know where it's coming from. The elevation is more than 1,200 meters (nearly 4,000 feet) so that's one of the reason for the specialty coffee.

Q: What's your biggest challenge as a small business owner?

A: There's a lot of competition, of course, and the price. In Madison, the price of coffee is too low. If you go to cities in the south, small or big towns, the same bag of coffee is \$14 to \$16. Here it's from \$8 to \$9, and if you increase the price just a little bit, people don't buy it. I don't think people understand that coffee is very labor intensive. If you want a good quality coffee, a specialty coffee, you have to pay the price. It should be more expensive here because we are more in the north and the transportation is more expensive to get it here.

Q: Does weather impact your sales?

A: Not really. When it's cold or it's summer people drink coffee.

Q: Where was the first place you sold your coffee?

A: When we went to Woodman's, the guy said (the store) was full of coffee and maybe

next year (they would consider us). But we had a conversation that included a cup of coffee and he said, "Let's put this coffee in all of the Woodman's". That was 2011, and that year we got Woodman's, Metcalfe's and Hy-Vee. That same year we started selling here at the (Hilldale) farmers market.

Q: What was your set up like at your first farmers market?

A: There was a tent, and it was great. I love farmers markets. It's the best way to promote my coffee and speak with people and tell them where they can buy it.

Q: Tell me about your truck. What kind of vehicle is this?

A: It's a U.S. Post Office (truck) from 1984, but they cut it. It's a little bit longer usually, but they cut it a little bit. I got it from a friend who wanted to do a food truck for Mexican food, but it was too small for that. But for coffee, it's perfect. I think sales increased just because of it. I like it. I like it a lot. It has tons and tons of miles.

Q: What kind of investment did it take to build the truck?

A: About \$10,000. But I've had to add signs because sometimes people (ask) if this is (an) ice cream or coffee truck. I can't hire a tall guy. They have to be just a little bit higher than me and that's it.

Omar Lopez

Co-owner of Cafe Social

Age: 47

Hometown: Armenia, Quindo, Columbia

Came to the U.S. in: 1999

Company founded: 2010

Education: University of Quindo and Edgewood College

Website: www.cafesocial.com