SLICE OF LIFE

Fair Trade Café

**The Dish:** An airy shop near downtown Phoenix where the menu emphasizes community support, urban renewal, some of the tastiest fair-trade-certified, organic, shade-grown coffees and espresso, plus mouth-watering pastries and sandwiches.

“When you do good things, it comes back to you.”

From the genesis of her idea, Stephanie Vasquez was determined to create a shop that sold coffee she could be proud of, in a way she could be proud of. In other words, the coffee, pastries and sandwiches had to start from the best ingredients. And the business had to operate in a way that supported the environment, local businesses and the local community.

Three and a half years later she can look back and smile. But that doesn’t mean the journey was easy.

**The Seeds of a Dream**

A trip to a Costa Rican coffee operation seeded her original dream to start Fair Trade Café. “It was just such a serene environment,” she said, speaking of the trip. “I wanted something like that here. So I came back and started working on a business plan.”

But ‘serene’ wouldn’t describe the business environment she found. “Everyone said ‘Stephanie there’s no money in coffee. We can’t give you a loan because there’s no money in it.’ And so I continued to pound the pavement and ran across this opportunity and learned as I went along.”

**A Streetcar Named . . .**

She met her business partner—Michelle LASTNAME?--and the two finally arranged to take over a struggling coffee shop that was being run by volunteers from a nearby church. The location was perfect: close to a number of downtown government offices, on the ground floor of a residential building in a trendy area, next to an established Phoenix cathedral and with storefront exposure to one Phoenix’ most travelled streets.

Which was about to be torn up to make way for the city’s new light rail system.

“I remember the first month thinking ‘What did I invest in?’ I’m talking $200 days. Entire days,” she said. “But Michelle was very involved in the community and organizations here, and she really helped open our doors to the community. That made the difference. There are other coffee shops, but we’re known now as a community spot.”

**Local Support**

Stephanie describes those first months as “a ghost town.” She and Michelle were closing the doors at three o’clock and fighting through the ever-changing construction mess each day. She was going to Costco a few times a week to get supplies.

“A lot of people really didn’t want to mess with us then because we were so small,” she said. “But Shamrock–maybe they saw what we saw–was willing to work with us. They were great.”

And eventually the community involvement started to turn things around.

**The Place to Be**

Surrounded by traffic barriers and rebar, Fair Trade Café started to become known as the place to go for local art, community meetings, music and more. As light rail proved to be a Phoenix success, businesses like Fair Trade Café that had suffered through two years of construction, witnessed a new beginning.

“Downtown grew and became a more popular place to be, and we did, too,” Stephanie said. The café closes at 9 o’clock now and she points to three business rush periods each day. Shamrock Foods supports her with regular deliveries of paper products, bakery items and ingredients for the full menu of sandwiches. **Chicken Curry** is the current best-seller--a **“perfect blend of sweet and spicy . . . a café secret that keeps our regulars coming back. We serve it on seedless rye, with lettuce, tomatoes, and sprouts.”**

“When Jessie (Corral, DSR) came along we started finding new ways to improve our business,” she said.

“He very gently nudges me toward looking at other horizons. I’ve run a lot of new menu items because of him. He’s always coming in with fresh ideas.”

“We’re still growing and we haven’t always been able to take advantage of some of the things Shamrock offers, but he’s always reminding us, so that when the time is right we’ll be ready.”

**Mirror Image**

Stephanie and Michelle have opened a second location. It’s located a mile away, at the heart of downtown Phoenix, so there’s less business on weekends and the café is open only Monday through Friday. “It’s kind of where we were here three years ago,” she said, and fully expects that by supporting local organizations and events the new location will become another community gathering spot. That philosophy is at the core of her business plan: basing the business on good products, supporting local vendors and the local community.

“I honestly think that’s how we survived. When you do good things, it comes back to you.”

Fair Trade Cafe

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Shamrock Star: “All of our paper products come from Shamrock. The selection is great and Jessie (Corral, DSR) keeps finding more things that fit who we are.”