



May 12, 2020 Transcript

Karl Fisher of Alabaster Coffee Roaster & Tea Co. is interviewed by Ellen Matis of Hello Social Co.

Ellen: I'm Ellen Matis, and I am the owner of Hello Social Co. And today, on behalf of the PA Wilds Center, I'm interviewing Karl Fisher of Alabaster Coffee Roaster and Tea Company. He's going to share a little about how the organization is pivoting amid what is really an uncharted time for small business owners. So, hey, Karl, welcome.

Karl: Hello. Thank you.

Ellen: Yeah! Just to get us started, [and] for those watching that aren't familiar with you, tell us what is Alabaster Coffee.

Karl: Yeah. So Alabaster is a coffee bar and a coffee roasterie. We're in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, right downtown. And we're coming up on our tenth anniversary. We will be 10 here in August. And really, you know, the focus of our business has always been both coffee and community. You know, we've always wanted to bring those two things together. So we have a retail coffee shop front that is coffee and drinks and merchandise, some small food. We also have a full coffee roasterie that is doing both retail and wholesale sales and then some, you know, some online work. We also do some controlled consulting and training, business planning, things like that.

Karl: Right. And, you know, there are a lot of different places where you could start your business. Why the Pennsylvania Wilds?

Karl: So I was kind of a transplant to Pennsylvania when I was a kid. And I just love it here. I loved living in Pennsylvania. I love our location and being in the outdoors. You know, I decided very shortly after school I wanted to go really, really far away and then changed my mind and decided that Williamsport specifically is really where I wanted to be, [and it was] where my wife wanted to be as well. And we came back, moved back to Williamsport, just about 13 years ago, very much with the intention that this was an area that we loved and

we wanted to put down roots in and invest in, and whatever we were doing, [we were] trying to make the area a better place, you know -- a place that we were excited to live in.

Ellen: Yes, I totally agree, and that makes a lot of sense. So obviously, as business owners, we've all had to to really kind of change our business models and shift the way that we're doing business. As a result of COVID-19. So what are some of the things that Alabaster has done amid the crisis?

Karl: Yeah, so our change and our pivot, it happened very, very quickly. I mean, almost immediately, you know, was our change. And in general, about 65 to 70 percent of our gross revenue is through our retail front. And the other main section is through wholesale. Well, in you know, about a week, it was decided that to close our retail front to customers. So that happened really quickly. And because our wholesale customers are largely either larger institutions or colleges or other shops like us and restaurants, we also actually have a lot of churches that we roast for. Like I said, in a very small period of time, we all closed. So that came to a pretty stark halt. The biggest change that we made immediately was shifting to online sales, which, you know, a lot of folks have been doing. But it was a big change for us. We'd always had a website, but did very little business through it. So I'm really grateful that we had the kind of the bones, you know, the structure to do that. But that was that that was a major pivot. And it was really, really great for us. And I think the thing that kept us kind of afloat, especially through this first handful of weeks. Now kind of beyond and beyond, just our online sales. And as you know, the state is looking to, you know, what is it what does it mean to reopen? What does it mean to find a kind of new normal? We're asking lots of questions about how does that impact what our our front retail business is?

Karl: So just for the last couple of weeks, we decided to do kind of a soft start. And I've been doing curbside pickup and local delivery through something we've called Alabaster Local Market. And we started largely to try to reach our immediate community with the kind of more non-perishables that we had and still getting beans out, getting chocolate brewing equipment. And then just last week, we started moving toward actually bulk drinks. So we're now in addition to canning -- we've always canned our cold brew coffee -- we're now doing quart and a half gallon jugs of iced drinks and we're making those available. Right now, we're open, limited hours two days a week. And that's kind of our start back in to get some business going to start bringing some of our staff back in a way that we're confident that we can have good financial support for the long term.

Ellen: Yeah. And you mentioned your staff. So I guess my first question is, how big is our staff and how many people are we talking about and what are some of the other ways that you've kind of supported them through this?

Karl: Yeah. So we have we have 13 people on staff besides myself. And that was a big shift when we pretty much had to cease all of our retail operations, we did not have business for our barista staff. And so one of the things that we wanted to do, you know, this was early March.... One of things that we did for our staff, probably the one of the hardest things I've ever done as a as a leader or as an employer, we took our last staff meeting and we walked through with our whole staff how to apply for unemployment.

Karl: You know, we wanted to make sure that this was something that we could we could try to be taking the best care of them that we could and utilizing the tools and the resources that we have. And and frankly, unemployment compensation is a tool and a resource that's available to us. So we wanted to make sure that we helped them get connected there. We've also gone through we've looked at some different merchandise, things that we've done. So we've had some different mugs, for instance, that we've put up for sale and that we've had all of the proceeds for those go to our staff. We're of course taking care of our staff with coffee, you know, certainly as that's been going on... Through our website, we put together a virtual tip jar, which I'd seen some other shops like us around the country start to do, so we put that up. I had no idea how that was going to just how that was going to fly. Yeah, and we saw such a huge outpouring of support from folks, you know, giving to that virtual tip jar that we could then disperse to our staff. It was amazing. And it wasn't even, you know, our hyper local customers. You know, we've been seeing that come in from all around the country.

Karl: Yeah, I think that virtual tips jar program is a great thing that has come out of this nationwide. And for those PA Wilds businesses that maybe haven't thought about something like that so far, it's certainly something to consider.

Karl: Absolutely.

Ellen: So you mentioned that, you know, one of the things that you did was you sat down and you talked with your staff about what was going on and how to apply for unemployment. But the amount of information that was coming from different resources was astronomical. We had to parse through tons of information as this first started. So what were some of the programs or resources or maybe even organizations that you found helpful that you'd encourage others to check out?

Karl: Yes. And as you say, I mean, honestly, it was mind numbing those first few weeks. Everyone had opinions and everyone had some information and some end to know how to to sort through all of that was so difficult. You know, we leaned very much, honestly, into PA Wilds, which was super helpful as a resource. I'd also highlight here locally in Williamsport and throughout the region The Covation Center has been a great help. Full disclosure, I'm on their board. But I will say the Covation Center did a great job of answering lots of questions for businesses of how to pay for things, loans, grants, what's true, what's not true. They were great. Our local Chamber of Commerce has done a really good job of sending out very periodic emails about resources, lots of government links and seminars and webinars that can be tuned into and honestly otherwise as a resource, one of the things that I'm learning through our business is that anything that we're spending and I think this is regardless of whether you have received any sort of loan or grant or not, track everything and step up your game to protect yourself. And in doing that, I'd say if you have an accountant that you work with, like run everything by them. Make sure that you're on the same page and that you are friends with them because they will be the ones to really help get you clear information. And if there are questions, they're going to be one of the easiest resources to ask questions to and get a clearer answer.

Ellen: Yeah, absolutely. And do you think that, you know, as a result of this, there have been any silver linings for you personally or anything that you're going to carry through as a business owner in the future?

Karl: Yeah, you know, a lot of the things that we needed to do, I think, to just survive those first few weeks. So honestly, even like curbside pickup and ordering ahead, they were things that honestly, I never really wanted to do before. I was uninterested, and I felt like it took away from the style of business that we were trying to have. But that that all had to change. And so if nothing else, one, going through these last few weeks has forced us to just try new things and be willing to do that. You know, any time that we try something new, it's disruptive. Right. It causes a disruption. And I think can oftentimes be a piece of fear that keeps us from trying new things. But one of the one of the great things about this time is that everything has already been disrupted. You know? So... that would almost be my encouragement that, you know, this is a great time to just try something new because the disruption is already there. So I feel the freedom to get to explore and try something.

Ellen: Yeah, it's absolutely a great time to just see what sticks. And so, you know, as far as what's kept you going during this time, what would you say is maybe some of your inspiration or, you know, what's what's kept you going during a very stressful time?

Karl: Yeah, I mean, we've gotten so many just notes and emails from folks reaching out just checking in with us, you know, that's been great. I know personally, I can downplay that a lot. I feel like I don't need input from other people. But this has been a good reminder, especially as we're just not seeing the community that we're used to. You know, we exist very much here, too, to benefit our community. And it hurts when you're not around people that you care about and people that you love. So to hear that is really great. One of the things that's helped me, you know, so 10 years ago before doing this, I was a pastor before having Alabaster. And if anything, through kind of my faith worldview, you know, I think back to just the Lord's Prayer. Give us today our daily bread. Give us the things that we need for today. I'm very much a person who likes to plan and I want to plan out everything. I want to plan for a plan, for a plan. And, you know, there were there were many days at the beginning of this or I just didn't know what to do because everything changed daily and I couldn't plan and it drove me crazy. So just kind of remembering, like, take it a day at a time. Now, one day I can only do what I can do for today. I have a little animal wear sign at home. That just says, you know, "what good shall I do this day?" And I have a right on the front door, where I hang my hats. And so I see it every day when I leave. "Just what good shall I do today?" And that's just been a really good reminder of even though I can feel ... maybe it feels hopeless... It certainly feels hard; we don't know what's coming next; but, you know, personally, I can choose to do something good today.

Ellen: Yeah, I think that's super inspiring. And it's it's it's great to hear you say that that's higher keeping going these days.

Karl: That's right.

Ellen: Well, Karl, thank you. Thank you so much for coming on today. For those of you that are watching. Just a reminder that you can learn everything you need to know about this series on Wild's kopi dot org. And if you'd like to share your own story about how you've pivoted your business model as a result of Cauvin, 19, feel free to log on to that website and apply. We really want to see other small businesses participating in this. So, Karl, thank you.

Karl: Thank you. Appreciate it.

Ellen: All right. Good Bye.