

The Zest S13E18

Roberto: [00:00:00] There's this romantic idea that owning a coffee shop is really glamorous, but it's really hard work.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today, the coffee business is actually the people business.

It's not about the coffee. Owning a coffee shop is about connecting with people, so says Roberto Torres. He's the president and co-founder of Blind Tiger Coffee Roasters. What started as a local coffee concept has grown into a company with eight locations across Tampa, including a presence at Tampa International Airport, and I had a ton of questions for him about running a business inside the airport.

We met up with Roberto at Blind Tiger's Ybor City location. In this conversation, he shares his journey from being an accountant in his native Panama [00:01:00] to owning one of Tampa Bay's most revered local brands with his business partner. He also pushes back on the romanticized idea of owning a coffee shop.

This is really gonna be a wake-up call if you think you wanna own a coffee shop. And he explains how entrepreneurship is like a classic video game.

Roberto: When we started in 2014, we weren't trying to create a specific vibe. We just thought what was important or ideal for us is really what we wanted to represent. So the first store, it's in, it's, it's in the corner of 19th Street and 7th Avenue in Ybor City. So what I thought w- w- what it c- it could be compelling or interesting is that It looked like if it would've been there for 100 years and we just, you know, opened the, opened the door and everything looked the way that it would've looked, I don't know, 100 years ago.

[00:02:00] That's our idea of what a speakeasy inspired coffee house will be. And I think being in this Ybor City outpost from the city of Tampa, uh, allows us the opportunity to be a little bit more playful a- a- and also to really try to understand what is it that people are looking for. So at the time there were more daytime professionals, like architects and lawyers and accountants.

Dalia: Did you used to be an accountant?

Roberto: I used to be an accountant, yeah. I mean, I am still one. I'm probably a recovering accountant- ... more than anything else. I, I got an accounting degree and a finance degree from FSU. What did- And then- What did you wanna do with that? Um, I, I, I wanted to be an auditor. So, so o- once you go into a- into accounting you can pick two tracks.

You can be an auditor or you can be tax. So I wanted to be, to do audit, and I did it for, like, about eight years b- before I started to start my own business. Um, we started with an apparel company [00:03:00] first. Uh, so we were doing jeans, T-shirt, hats, bags, accessories, and we sold it to, like, about 300 boutiques across the country.

Um-

Dalia: And that was Black & Denim, right? That was Black & Denim, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Roberto: I remember. Ma- Macy's, Stein Mart, Walt Disney, Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus. I mean, these were a lot of our, of, of, of our customers. And then w- we got this, this idea that we could have a little boutique in Tampa that was representative of, of who we were.

'Cause we were just o- only selling at wholesale. And we did it in Ybor City in 2013, and then we opened, like, a small little outfit, and then that evolved into later on The Blind Tiger the following year.

Dalia: Wait, how does a clothing company evolve into a coffee company? Um- You say that like it's, "Oh, you know how that happens."

Roberto: It totally, it totally, it totally happens by accident. We, we were trying to get a contract at the airport for, for some locations at the airport, and at the time we wanted to [00:04:00] put a newsstand right next to a Ron Jon Surf Shop store. So we wanted to show them, okay, this is, you know, what a store looks like that has food and beverage and also has- T-shirts and clothing.

And we were successful at that, so on Airside A, if you go through a Ron Jon Surf Shop, and then there's a news- a Stellar Bay newsstand, that's ours. Um- Wait, you own the newsstand? The, yeah, yeah. Inside the airport, yeah.

Dalia: How do you get one of those? Yeah. 'Cause I feel like being able to sell a bottle of water for, like, \$8- that's where the money is.

Roberto: Well, you'd be surprised. I mean, the, the, the airport does, they kinda, they dictate and, and, and regulate what it is that we can sell things for, right? I think the idea, uh, was that at the time, the airport had been open for 40 years, and they wanted to open this opportunity for a lot of people that didn't have a presence in the airport.

So we wanted to really, um, delve into this [00:05:00] opportunity and, and see what else we could do i- in this airport space. Um, and, and, and, and again, it became by accident because we were just intended to just open one.

Dalia: Wow.

Roberto: Yeah.

Dalia: Why do you think airport food and beverages matter? The Tampa Airport is pretty good, especially when- Yeah, yeah

you travel to other airports. Like, I'm from Cleveland, and I love Cleveland, but when I go home, I'm like, "Why isn't there a phone charger at my seat?"

Roberto: Right, right,

Dalia: right. Tampa, phone charger at every seat, lots of local restaurants at the airport. I mean, you have a captive audience, so you can charge crazy prices for water and things like that.

Why does the food scene at an airport matter?

Roberto: Yeah. I think, I think that's a very interesting question. I, I think to your point, I mean, I, I saw this thing, somebody was complaining about an airport in New York where they got, like, trail mix and a bottle of water and it was, like, \$38. So, so even though it's kinda like a joke, I mean, it's the first contact that visitors or tourists have with the city.

It, it makes the [00:06:00] travel experience a lot more pleasant than it would've, uh, if you travel by car, by train, by boat, or any of the other methods. But what I take away from that is that I think there's a much, much bigger opportunity for food and beverage concepts. Now, merchandise that is geared towards Tampa, local things that are geared towards Tampa, you, you don't want, like, just to buy, like, Chinese tchotchkes and then just sell them there.

For example, our coffee bags in stores are \$22 a bag, so we sell them for the same amount of money in our airport locations. However, that becomes not just a coffee bag. Now it becomes a souvenir that is, happens to be food disguised as a gift.

Dalia: Yes, and I love those, um, souvenirs that you can use up, that aren't just gonna, like- That's right

you know, a snow globe that's gonna- Yeah, yeah ... be around forever. Like consumable souvenirs. Okay, [00:07:00] somebody listening, this- Might, forget my question sheet. We're, we're way off track- But this is so fascinating, because somebody listening is like, "Oh, I have a, a food business." Yeah. "I would love to sell my product in the airport."

100%. Yeah. Do you have to own the whole store?

Roberto: No, no, no. So for example, um, we, we represent, uh, the Columbia Restaurant Group. Like we sell their sangria mix, and their coffee, and their little, uh, ceramics that they import from Spain. Um, we sell popcorn, we sell, you know, cookies. Um, we have a f- uh, a buying team that is, specializes on, on, on local offerings.

So you do not have to own a store in the airport to be able to sell your stuff. You can just literally send us a line sheet, send us what the price is. And again, there's a very specific formula of the, the, the airport calls it Main Street plus 10%. So, so whatever it is, you know, let's [00:08:00] say you sell a bag of popcorn for \$15, we can only mark it up 10% to make the difference for it to be inside of the airport.

Dalia: Fascinating. Yeah. Oh my gosh. Okay. You mentioned Columbia Restaurant Group and, um, we gotta talk about our mutual friend, Jeff Houck. Yes. I feel like he comes up in every episode on this podcast. Um, so he, he represents Columbia Restaurant Group in terms of communications. So he described you as, quote, "Quietly building a coffee empire by creating coffee shops in atypical places."

We talked a little bit about how you chose some of your locations- Right ... and I said how genius it was that you were in the Brandon Mall right across from the Apple Store. How do you choose some of the l- l- locations, and what are some of the ones that Jeff might be talking about maybe where we wouldn't expect a coffee shop?

Roberto: Right, right. I, I, I think it's not necessarily an empire. I think it's a- Yes, it's, just own it ... I think it's a- It's an empire ... I think it's a platform. Well, the, the reason why I don't like empire is because empires fall. Uh, so I wouldn't like to see it fall. Okay. But, but, but, but it's more like a platform. I, I, I, I do think that coffee [00:09:00] just happens to be the medium that we transact.

We're really into the people business. We like to believe that what we do allows somebody to remember how we made them feel, and therefore how they will remember us in the future. So I think that we pick a lot of our sites depending on if somebody kinda like tells us, "Hey, you should check this thing out."

We have said a lot more nos than we have said yes within the last 12 years. And, and it's really by intention.

Dalia: Okay. You said you're not in the coffee business, you're in the business of making people feel a certain way, which I think is so smart. Correct. Yeah. There are like a million coffee shops. Yeah.

Everybody wants to have a coffee shop. Yeah. What is a mistake that some of those other places are making? You don't have to name names.

Roberto: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I think, I think, um, one, one of the mistakes is that they wanna compete with- Something that they cannot be- Starbucks ... [00:10:00] because, well, uh, it, it could be, it could be, it could be Dunkin', it could be 7 Brew, it can be all these other, like, I call it the rise of, like, the coffee shop drive-throughs, kinda like how cupcakes was like 10 years ago, and, and five years ago it was, like, car washes.

I think there's this romantic idea that owning a coffee shop is really glamorous, but it's really hard work. You have to get up at 5:00 in the morning, seven days a week, to get to your store so that you're there. I mean, 75% of our money we made it from 6:00 AM till 12 noon. Taking into consideration how many coffee outlets are in a specific neighborhood, we really wanna go to places where are kinda underserved, or they are not necessarily open to the idea of having a national chain, and they would li- they would prefer something local.

And there's a reason for [00:11:00] that. I mean, I think for, for a national chain, 88 cents of every dollar goes to a bank account somewhere outside of that metropolitan statistical area or that ZIP code, versus a local coffee shop, 92 cents of that dollar s- gets spent in the local economy. So, so I think for us, it's, it's, it's the idea of that we get to hire people that live within the city that we like, or the, or the, or the neighborhood that we like.

Um, we, we get to support our neighborhood. We get to serve them. We, we get an opportunity to really develop a relationship and a friendship and kinship, and, and, a- a- and, and I think it's more than that because we get an opportunity to support growing families. We get an opportunity to support retirees. We get an opportunity to support fundraisers.

Uh, it, it's, it's, it's, it's really neat being involved and ingrained in a particular neighborhood where we have different stores, and the way that we do that is by going to a specific [00:12:00] school and then supporting that school first, talking to the principal, talking to the teachers, and then, and then it, it's funny to see how quickly that word gets spread around that we're business friendly and that we're neighborhood friendly.

Dalia: Oh, that's smart.

Do you think some of this wisdom comes from your upbringing in Panama?
[00:13:00]

Roberto: I believe that it's a hybrid. Uh, m- most of the time, it, it's things that I read or I pick up. Uh, o- one particular one is like I never found or saw a successful business that didn't invest in their community, or it wasn't part of their community.

And, and, and that really starts this, like, spiral of, like, what really is investment versus what is just a way of transacting or doing business? If, if, if you're not reinvesting in your store, if it doesn't look the part, if, if, if you don't get an opportunity to, to, to kind of highlight it and be proud of that, then there are people who wanna come.

But if you're constantly doing that and, and listening to what it is that they want, then is that the way to do business? Uh, I'll, I'll, I'll argue that a lot of concepts, and I mean, I'm, I'm, I'm definitely a student of the game when it comes to food and beverage and retail and hospitality.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, I love that.

And just talking to you, I can tell you are invested in your community. I asked you before we were recording, "What neighborhood do you live in?" And you said Seminole Heights. Yeah. And I'm like, "Oh, that totally tracks." That's [00:14:00] such a ... He's, he's such a local guy. So you care about your neighborhood because- Yeah

you live here, too. Yeah. I mean, we're in Ybor, but it's all part of- Right, right, right ... Tampa Bay. What's a change that you just made or that you're getting ready to make?

Roberto: Well, I think, um, September last year, we started with, like, a full day brunch seven days a week in Ybor. None of the other, uh, locations have kitchens.

This is the only one that has a full kitchen. So we decided to go omelets and burgers and pancakes and all of that seven days a week, which has done a tremendous ... Th- th- th- there wasn't a breakfast spot in Ybor proper. Um, so, so we're serving that gap and that need, which is fantastic.

Dalia: Wow.

Roberto: Yeah.

Dalia: So was that exciting, or was that like, "Oh, now I gotta hire a chef.

Now I gotta figure out what to put on the brunch menu because these people keep changing what they want, so I have to keep changing"?

Roberto: Yeah. I think it was, I think it was really exciting to find a lot more data about what could be or not be successful, and now we get an opportunity to iterate on other things, like, like new recipes and, like, [00:15:00] tasting menus, and, like, we, we have found a tremendous amount of success with events because, again, people are trying to shop with experiences.

So whether that's, like, somebody playing live music or somebody playing a DJ set, or we're doing, like, a yoga patio thing in Seminole Heights tonight at 7:00 PM. So a lot of people think that this idea of a coffee shop is just to be open. What I, I, I like to challenge that notion with the way that you run business is giving people what they want, and, and, and, and we find a tremendous amount of success with people wanting to consume these different experiences at different times in different neighborhoods and, and, and, and, and we wanna be there for that.

Dalia: That's awesome. And I would say that takes a lot of humility because you could say, "This is what I'm offering. Take it or leave it." Right, right. But you're letting the people tell you what they want- Correct ... and you're making adjustments.

Roberto: Yeah, and, and I would like to believe that we're sort of like the owners, but we just, we just [00:16:00] in the middle of, you know, making sure that it's here every day so they can come because they- they are the ones that are telling us what they would like to see in there.

And I don't necessarily think that at any point in time we thought that this would be, now people like to call a scalable business, um, or like a, a, a business where we're responsible for over 50 people and their livelihood. That's important to us, uh, making sure that we left them better than when we found them, uh, making sure that they left the company better than, than what, what, what, what, what they found them.

And in figuring out if we're gonna open more stores or now we're delving into, um, retail with like grocery stores or big box stores or more online retail, that we can definitely have the bandwidth to support that.

Dalia: Amazing. Okay, last question. I read that you play Tetris every day.

Roberto: Yeah, I do.

Dalia: That's [00:17:00] my favorite game.

Oh, wow. But I'm old school. So is there anything that Tetris has taught you about running this business? Tetris is the... Uh, you describe the game for people who don't know.

Roberto: Yeah. Yeah. It's, uh, is this, uh, game that is like bricks, where there's like seven or eight different shapes. Um, and, and as the game increases a- a- and as you unlock sort of like this 10 by 10, the lines, then it gets faster and faster and faster.

So, so things come at you faster. But, you know, de- depending on how long have you been playing the game, then it, that to me, I, uh, I, I, I, at, at a one point it kinda slow down. You can kinda hedge some bets of where you can put some bricks and if it's gonna work or not. I think what Tetris have showed me is that not everything that comes the way needs to stay that way.

You can always shift it. And not everything that the way that you put it is actually the best way. [00:18:00] Sometimes there's better ways to put those bricks. So to, to, to me, it's, it's, it's constantly changing, constantly in flux, constantly, uh, allowing me the opportunity to build more or to, or, or to display more.

I think, um, most of the time we see problems as obstacles where we like to think that the problem is the way, and, and, and stop admiring the problem. I, I learned that from a, from a friend- Wait.

Say that a- ... a couple- Okay, this is like- A couple weeks. Yeah ... some Oprah stuff

here.

Dalia: Stop admiring the problem.

Roberto: Stop admiring the problem.

Dalia: Yeah. Who said that?

Roberto: Uh, his name is Brian Murphy. He's the CEO for ReliaQuest.

Dalia: What do you mean by that?

Roberto: Well, he said, you know, so- sometimes the problems are so massive that you just, like, keep thinking or, or sleep on it, or, like, you come back and you're kinda like, "Oh, man, how are we gonna fix this?" Well, stop, stop, s- stop glorifying or admiring it.

Just, just come up with a revised plan and start taking, ta- taking steps towards, you know, biting an elephant one, one bite at a time. Mm. Most of the time, I, I [00:19:00] think I've been guilty of admiring a problem where for whatever reason I didn't wanna, like, think about it, and that can be, you know, cost prohibitive because we could be losing money.

Now, I do know that if there is an opportunity to perhaps, um, utilize technology for that, uh, we wanna be a player to kinda understand h- how is it that we can, you know, fix a problem. But most of the time, so I've come to understand that problem relies around people. So being a clear communicator, it's a lot better for business because you get...

If, if you have a new plan, you, you get some people to buy in. If, if you have a bad plan, you, you need to course-correct, but you, but you need to be able to communicate correctly to all those people that are gonna be employ- on, on, on, on top of that solution so that they can execute it correctly. Um, m- m- most of the time, I think, too, you, you gotta understand where people are mentally or physically and if they're [00:20:00] open to hearing what you're saying.

Uh, you know, sometimes the way that- Now, this time and, and politically and, like, mentally and, and, and everything that's happening in the world, sometimes people wanna have a conversation, but I don't think that they're ready or, or, or they're in the best mental state to receive sort of, like, an answer. And, and, and it's your job to kind of figure out where, where is that and then kind of walk them through that.

So, so, so telling stories is the best way, I think, to, to, to get them an opportunity to, to see what it is that you're talking about, and then trying to get the- them to regurgitate that message back. Oh. Because sometimes some people say, "Oh, yeah, I'm listening" and then you're like, "Okay, so what is it that we're trying to do?"

And it's totally something different than what you just said.

Dalia: Yes. Telling stories is great. Oh, I'm still stuck on stop admiring the problem. And I'm picturing the Tetris bricks. They come in different shapes- Yeah ... and they're falling, but to your point, you can turn them- You can turn them ... before they hit the ground.

Roberto: Correct. [00:21:00] What I can say unequivocally about the Blind Tiger is that it's this, it's this medium for community, and it is safe space for anybody to come that want a break from the world.

Dalia: Roberto, thank you so much. What's your business partner's name? We gotta give him a shout-out.

Roberto: His name is Luis. Luis.

Yeah. Okay.

Dalia: Yeah. Well, R- Roberto and Luis- Yeah ... thank you for bringing this to our community. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. I- we took way longer than I told you we would. No, no, that's good. Stop being so interesting.

Roberto: Thank you so much.

Dalia: Roberto Torres is president of Blind Tiger Coffee Roasters. And I'm curious, what is your go-to order in a coffee shop? Let us know on Facebook or Instagram. You'll find us at The Zest Podcast. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The

Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of
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