

youth & experience THE PERFECT BLEND

COLUMBUS COFFEE CELEBRATES ANOTHER GREAT LANDMARK

FACES OF YOUTH: PETER WEBSTER, MURRAY AND JANE MERAI, THE HALL FAMILY – DANIELLE, KORBY, NICOLE, BROOKE AND BRENDON



➔ Looking around at the crowd in the ballroom of Auckland's Pullman Hotel, the eye is struck not just by how elegant everyone looks – that's to be expected at Columbus Coffee's black tie dinner – but by how young many of the franchisees are.

When Jane Merai and Korby Hall go up to accept their shared award for *Franchisees of the Year* (it was too close to call between them, apparently), their combined age doesn't look more than 60. Columbus is celebrating its 20th Anniversary tonight, and it surely won't be long before the brand is older than some of its franchisees.

But success in franchising is the result of combining individual effort with group experience, and there's a great deal of that in the room, too. Columbus is perhaps unique in that all four of its founders are still involved in the business and are also up on stage tonight. What they don't know about coffee (and tea!) isn't worth knowing, and they've backed it up with some of the best food and franchising expertise in the country. The result is a multi-award-winning chain that is about to open its 64th café and still has opportunities for more franchisees around the country.

CAUTION PAYS DIVIDENDS

When Columbus Coffee first opened in Auckland's High Street in 1995, it immediately won *Metro* magazine's *Café of the Year Award*. 'Columbus was designed as a celebration of coffee, and the founders set out to provide everything the coffee aficionado could possibly require, from beans to machines,' explains franchise manager Peter Webster. 'Over the next five years, three more stores opened as they helped kick-start New Zealanders' love affair with coffee.'

When Graeme Tait joined the quartet, things really took off. 'Graeme was highly experienced in franchise operations,' Peter explains, 'and we started adding good food to good coffee. That set the standard for the future.'



FACES OF EXPERIENCE: COLUMBUS COFFEE FOUNDERS DAVID BURTON, FRANCES HOLLIS, LANCE WYATT (STANDING) AND JOHN BURTON

Today, the chain stretches from Invercargill to Whangarei, 'despite our cautious approach,' Peter laughs. 'We are very careful with the sites and people we select – it's important to get both right. Franchisees have to invest big money in opening a store and our job is to give them the very best assistance, both in terms of operations and position. I think our caution was demonstrated during the global financial crisis. For a period there we opened no new cafés at all, preferring to concentrate all our efforts on supporting our existing franchisees, and we're proud to say we pulled every one through. Not a lot of hospitality franchises can say that!'

INNOVATION COUNTS

Caution or not, Columbus hasn't been afraid to innovate to help franchisees grow. In the past few years, a partnership with Mitre 10 Mega has seen 26 new cafés open in the stores, with more to come. 'A number of older cafés in Mitre 10 stores are also converting to the brand with excellent results,' Peter reports.

The franchise was also an early adopter of technology to help franchisees manage their businesses better. 'We bought into a Cloud-based business information system long before anyone else was thinking about it,' Peter explains. 'This gives franchisees really good access to figures, and keeps them and the company informed and ahead of the competition.'

'Recently, we launched the *Columbus Rewards* programme which is a loyalty scheme that allows customers to earn rewards points on *everything* they buy. It is a digital system which provides us with a vast range of valuable insights and is backed up by monthly special offers to encourage members back into our cafés.' Is it popular? 'You could say that – we've had 60,000 people join in the first three months of being live nationally. Sixty thousand!'

And then there's the food, with a dedicated team providing new recipes to in-house chefs every month which combine fashion with flavour, healthy eating with hearty appetites. 'Franchisees can develop their own menu items, too – innovations and ideas are welcome from every source and are an important part of the Columbus success,' Peter says.

OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW

But none of this would be effective without the franchisees who own and run every single Columbus Coffee outlet – with some owning more than one. 'Some of our franchisees are still in their 20s, like Korby Hall and his family who own Columbus stores at Mitre 10 Mega in Kapiti and Porirua,' says Peter. 'but many are in their 30s or above. Age doesn't matter nearly as much as energy, commitment to customer service and good business acumen.'

So where next for this highly-successful home-grown franchise? 'Believe it or not, quite a number of Auckland suburbs are still without a Columbus and we have gaps in choice locations all round the country,' says Peter. 'The investment required is between \$200,000 and \$400,000 depending on location so if you want to combine your age with our experience, talk to me today.' ■

ADVERTISER INFO

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