

When passion meets community: How this veteran restaurateur has reignited the feeling of community in the restaurant business and the Dupont neighborhood.

By Sophia Carroll



Rakesh Verma has spent the better part of his life dedicated to an often underappreciated industry; the restaurant industry. “Loving it would be an understatement” said Verma when discussing his passion for the restaurant business.

Beginning his career at 18 years old as a restaurant dishwasher, Verma has entrenched himself in the restaurant business, and has gradually moved up the chain of commands. Now he has just embarked on his newest venture into the industry by becoming a co-owner and co-founder of

Dupont's newest locally owned coffee shop: Dupont Coffee Collective.

This past February, the not-so-new coffee shop opened its doors to the Dupont circle neighborhood and its community.

The Dupont Coffee Collective was formerly a Firehook Bakery location that was originally bought out and set to close shop in late December. That was until former employees and current owners, Jessica Reyes and Rakesh Verma decided to invest in the business, and its people, themselves.

The new shop opened on Feb. 6 with all the same employees from the former bakery.

After almost two months open, the shop seems to be flourishing with operations running smoothly and an overall acceptance from the Dupont community.

Verma manages all back-of-house operations, dealing mostly with the accounting side of the business. However, his love of serving his community and its people shines through.

“Everyday I miss it, I have to hold myself back,” said Verma when comparing his current position to the previous years in his career.

The restaurant industry is special to Verma, “There are very few jobs where you get to meet and talk to so many people,” said Verma. This passion for the business has fueled many of his career and life decisions. Including the one to buy out and reopen this shop.

Through the Dupont Coffee Collective, Verma continues to share his love of this industry with a neighborhood of people who truly appreciate it.

Everybody’s family

The sense of community created by Verma and Reyes through the Dupont Coffee Collective is felt by its employees and customers alike.

Leshawn Conley worked for Firehook Bakery for seven years, and was brought back onto the staff after the ownership transition alongside many of the previous Firehook employees.

“Everybody around here’s like a family,” said Conley. She spoke about how her favorite part of working at the Dupont Coffee collective is simply interacting with customers and working alongside her fellow employees.



“Dupont period is a special place,” said Conley. She agrees that the Dupont Coffee Collective is a close knit community consisting of its owners, employees and customers.

The Dupont Circle community has embraced this change in ownership, and come out in support of the shop on a regular basis. “The response has been great,” said Verma.

On Sunday afternoons, the tiny shop can be seen filled to the brim with customers and community members.

When speaking with one customer, David Boord, a local law student at George Washington University Law School, he shared many positive sentiments about the coffee shop.

Boord noted that he supports employee-ownership and therefore thinks that this transition has been an overall positive one.

“I thought it was really cool, I haven’t noticed a change in the quality of food, like it’s still really good” said Boord.

Conley noted that the only change in product has been the shop’s baked goods. Firehook Bakery made all the pastries in house. However the Dupont Coffee Collective now sources its baked goods from local vendor, Uptown Bakery.

“I think their smoothies are really good,” Boord commented. My first purchase was, of course, their mixed berry smoothie and I can therefore attest to Boord’s review. The smoothies are really good.

What makes a restaurant successful?

Although high quality products are an essential part of what makes the Dupont Coffee Collective successful, it is not the only thing that makes it a special place, according to Verma.

“What you're selling is service,” Verma affirmed. Beginning as a restaurant dishwasher at the age of 18, Verma has learned a great deal about what it takes to make a customer happy in this industry.

He explained how the key to retaining long term customers is simply about how you make them feel. Verma noted that there are various coffee shops in the area. So what makes a customer choose his over any of the others? It’s the experience.

“It’s been estimated that repeat customers are responsible for generating up to 40% of a given business’ revenue,” according to an [article by Robin Johnston](#) for Bloom Intelligence. Verma too knows the power of community and repeat customers.

That is why comfort and community is a major staple of the Dupont Coffee Collective, which Verma has made sure to cultivate.

Employee-customer interaction is clearly a major part of the Dupont Coffee Collective’s business model. But Verma also explained how important it is for employees to feel valued and taken care of as well.

The value of community

“They’re the ones that make it happen day to day,” said Verma about his employees.

Before the ownership transition Verma had been working for Firehook Bakery for the past 20 years. For many of those years he had been working alongside the people he’s kept on as employees of the Dupont Coffee Collective.

Employees like Conley have been working at this restaurant location for years, and in buying the shop Verma and Reyes made it a mission to maintain the same staff, keeping their colleagues and friends out of unemployment.

The restaurant industry struggles as a whole in maintaining long-term staff members. According to author [Justin Guinn](#), recent data from the United States Bureau of Labor states, “the average annual restaurant industry turnover rate is 79.6% over the past 10 years.”

Verma says the high turnover rate within the restaurant industry has much to do with how employers treat their staff.

That is why the creation of such a supportive and welcoming community within every aspect of the Dupont Coffee Collective matters so much to Verma.

Source List

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Social Media Posts:

Dupont Circle has welcomed a not-so-new coffee shop to its neighborhood, learn about the life long restauranter behind this community-centered shop: [\[insert link\]](#).

The bright side of the restaurant industry is shown in the Dupont Coffee Collective and its new owners. Learn more about the shop and one of its co-owners here: [\[insert link\]](#)