

Gio Fillari:

Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening. This is Gio Fillari, guest host for the Seed To Cup podcast here on the Sprudge network. Gio Fillari from Coffee Feed out here in Portland, Oregon. Today I am graced with an illustrious guest. It is a very well-known person from Gary, Indiana. You initially think it's someone from the Jackson family. It is not. It is Mr. Rod Johnson, co-founder of BLK & Bold Specialty Beverages. Rod say, what's up, what's going on?

Rod Johnson:

What's up? Thank you for having me. Yeah. That's some great company to be in when you think about those that've come from Gary, and I hope I live up to it, live up to that introduction.

Gio Fillari:

You absolutely will. So you are from Gary, but you're currently... is it Des Moines, Iowa?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Born and raised in Gary, Indiana, but the business is headquartered in Des Moines. And I relocated here in the middle of the pandemic, actually, National Coffee day of 2020 is when we started that trek from West to the Midwest.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. I've been in and around Indiana quite a bit, it has some good parts. I, actually, I played college football out in Ohio, so I was in Bowling Green. So I'm kind of familiar with Indiana; Iowa, not so much [inaudible 00:02:26].

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. That doesn't surprise me. Not a lot of people are familiar with Iowa, and they have an even bigger shock when they find out that BLK & Bold and me and my business partner are here. They're, "Wow, there are black people in Iowa?" Never would've guessed.

Gio Fillari:

One million percent. Not only is black folks in general, like a black-owned coffee business? It's quite the area to do something like that.

Rod Johnson:

For sure.

Gio Fillari:

But you got the space up there, I imagine. I don't foresee a lot of booming businesses out there in Des Moines for coffee.

Rod Johnson:

You know, Des Moines, it's a little bit different than the rest of Iowa. Des Moines certainly has more of a city feel than it is country, but it still has some of those small town elements. So you get the best of both worlds with Des Moines versus the rest of the state.

Gio Fillari:

Got it. No, makes a lot of sense. It's like when you have those college towns in the random states, like in the Dakotas or what not, or Montanas, and it's quite different than other vibes you get across the state. So it makes a lot of sense.

Gio Fillari:

Listen, so we have a lot of listeners. Everyone's heard of BLK & Bold, but they may not know the story. So if you want to give a quick three, four-ish minute run down on the company, how it started, how you got into it?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, absolutely. So neither my business partner nor I had any formal background in coffee. In fact, he worked on the for-profit side in retail merchandising and brand business development, while I worked on a nonprofit side as a healthcare fundraiser and academic fundraiser. But eventually we kind of hit the ceilings in our respective careers, and we're looking to do something that, one, was different and; two, something that was more meaningful to who we are and the journey that we were on.

Rod Johnson:

What made most sense for us to do was to look in the mirror and check out our own daily rituals. And what was at the center of that was visiting a lot of coffee shops and drinking a lot of coffee and tea. So P, my business partner, got the bold idea one day and gave me a call and asked, "Hey man, do you drink coffee?" I was like, "Ah, not really. I'm more of a tea guy." You know, like I said, I spent a lot of time in coffee shops, but the extent of my coffee experience was adding a shot of espresso to my chai tea latte, right? And he's like, "Okay. Well, I got this idea. Tell me what your thoughts are."

Rod Johnson:

And then it just ultimately manifested itself into what we know today, which is BLK & Bold Specialty Beverages. We are a coffee roastery located in Des Moines, Iowa, that bridges the gap between specialty coffee and community impact. I referenced that we were looking to do something more meaningful, and we are checking that box by contributing a portion of our proceeds to organizations that support youth in need. As you referenced, born and raised in Gary, Indiana, and is notorious for a lot of things and for a lot of people. Some are not so favorable. And we were fortunate enough to overcome those circumstances and have built this business as a means to give back to people who are in those similar situations.

Gio Fillari:

That is amazing. And it's incredible for one, so shout out to you and P for starting this, but also understanding the give-back component. Where there's a lot of companies out there who like the idea of giving back if it's convenient, or if it fits into their strategy, as opposed to companies like yourself that build it as a foundational pillar on everything that they do. So especially 5% going towards youth needs, that's absolutely amazing.

Gio Fillari:

And you hit on a couple good things, how coffee shops tend to be the birthplace of a lot of ideas. It's just naturally this place where you kind of just hang out and you start cooking up ideas with your homeboys or your friends and figure out what's your next step, or what's your big idea.

Gio Fillari:

The other thing that you also mentioned that is impactful is that you said you're more of a tea guy. So let's talk a little bit about that. Was coffee really present in your household growing up, because for the most part, when you talk to black folks, they didn't necessarily have the Folgers or the Maxwell House or whatever, old school coffee cans that they had in the crib. They didn't really have those growing up. That it's actually 40% to 48% of black folks consume coffee is really not that much in the grand scheme. But what was it like growing up in your household? Were you introduced to coffee at an early age?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. No, that's a great question. And an even more interesting fact that about less than half of the people, black people in particular, are drinking coffee, despite it being the second most consumed beverage in America behind water. So that is particularly interesting to me. But I grew up around coffee. My grandparents, in particular, were big coffee drinkers. I remember vividly spending time with them on the weekends and them brewing coffee and reading the newspaper. I would read the comic strips while they read the more important part of the news. And I would just watch them drink coffee.

Rod Johnson:

A funny story that I'd like to share is one of my earliest memories around coffee is, was riding around with my grandpa. We were just running errands, and he had stopped at a coffee shop. And I remember the smell of coffee, man, that smells amazing. I was maybe three years old, three or four years old, and that really resonated with me. So much so that a week later we were running similar errands and I was like, "Hey, grandpa, are you going to stop at that coffee shop?" And he's like, "Why do you remember that?" I was like, "It smells was so good."

Gio Fillari:

[crosstalk 00:08:27]

Rod Johnson:

He's like, "Why did that make a difference to you?" I was like, "Man, I just remember the smell. It was amazing to me." And that's that still holds true today. When I walk into the roastery, it's very uplifting to smell those... smell that freshly roasted coffee. There's nothing like it.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. It is insane where some people remember things from taste or smell, or if they hear a song or something like that. But that first smell of coffee you're like, "What was that?" I remember having a little mocha pop for my dad. My dad's Sicilian, so he's drinking shots of espresso like it's water, and he was drinking coffee when he was growing up. So I got introduced to coffee at an early age because I was making it for my dad. He'd pour a little out for me, you know what I mean? Little baby Gio just taking a little shots of coffee or espresso before school, which was not a good idea. It was not a good idea at all. I was rambunctious at recess. I wanted to nap right after. It was just awful, but I would never trade it though.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. I remember tasting it and not liking it. It was like, ah, this is just too bitter. And it's like, ah, this is... Because they were drinking it black. No cream, no sugar, just fresh out the pot. I think they were just drinking it out the pot. And I was like, "Ah, I'll try a little bit," but it didn't fit my pallet until much later on. Now I drink significantly more coffee than I did prior to starting a business.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. I blogged that I got... I been drinking coffee a lot. I think I just now have more of an excuse to drink a lot of coffee. It's like, oh, my God it's for coffee bean stuff. It's research, just need to see the new shop. So you also bring up another good point and it's the idea of coffee tasting bitter versus now where your palate's more refined. Being in the industry, do you see any correlation from the older generation thinking that coffee needs to taste bitter, as opposed to maybe younger cats, just Millennials, Gen Z, getting more into the refined taste of coffee?

Rod Johnson:

Absolutely. I remember the first time that I sent a bag of beans to my grandparents. I was like, "Hey, I want you all to try this and compare it to the coffee that you had." I think they appreciated it, but they were just used to something. You do something for 50 years, that's your norm now. And anything outside of that, you're going to have some hesitancy towards it.

Rod Johnson:

But I continued to just educate them around the fact that coffee should be treated like a delicacy, the same way that wine is. And I think once people open their minds up to that it allows them to approach the tasting experience much different. And we're fortunate, the younger generation, to have visited coffee shops where third wave coffee is... that's on the forefront, and sourcing habits, and just being more intentional about the coffee that we're drinking.

Rod Johnson:

So we kind of grew up into that is essentially what I'm saying. Just in my own personal experience, I think that my grandparents and the older folks around me are seeing the light, that you could actually enjoy this daily ritual, as opposed to just pounding it for the sake of the caffeine.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. It's kind of when you pour peroxide on a cut or something like that, and it needs to burn or after you get [crosstalk 00:12:12]. Well, I'm bald now, but after you get a haircut, they put the alcohol along the hairline, you're like, "Ah, it's burning, that means it's working." It's like that same concept with coffee sometimes. We're like, "Hey, listen, it needs to be strong. It needs to be bitter. That that's how I know that the caffeine is ingested into my system," when in actuality there's tasting notes, right?

Rod Johnson:

Exactly, exactly.

Gio Fillari:

[crosstalk 00:12:33] you have caramel. You have lemon. You have a lot of these things that you should be able to enjoy with it, enjoy the journey, enjoy the process, so.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, and that's what swung the pendulum for me. I was ignorant to the fact that you could be enjoying this. And kudos to my man P for just being a mad scientist and being able to articulate why this is a delicacy. And I drink coffee black now. I had a cup this morning and going to have one later on this afternoon. Now that I know... What is this saying? You know better, you do better. One of those situations.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent, and I think a lot of people... just the entry point into coffee is just so different for people. Whether it's the Starbucks of the world or the Dutch Brothers or the Tim Hortons and [Heats 00:13:26], or you have a lot of these mainstream entry points that aren't necessarily specialty, but it introduced them to the idea of coffee, and then depending on how they got into coffee would be the way that they would need to operate to get to the core of coffee, like, what is coffee supposed to taste like?

Rod Johnson:

Right.

Gio Fillari:

What am I looking for? Is it like drinking alcohol or something where you just wanted to feel the burn, or am I supposed to actually like be more of a wine where I'm studying it, I'm understanding of the origin of where the beans are coming from and so on and so forth.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. No, that's part of our ethos is that we want people to have that aha moment with us. We want however they're introduced to our brand, if it's because of who owns it, if it because it's the different origins from where we source, if it's because of our community impact, however people are introduced to us, we want to take them on this journey so that they can have that revelation, if you will, of this is something that like you said, that can be enjoyed and not just thrown back for the sake of it.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. So I know we touched a little bit about the African-American population and how 40% to 50% of black folks are drinking coffee. Again, second most consumed liquid in the world or [crosstalk 00:14:55]-

Rod Johnson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gio Fillari:

... water. What do you feel are some of the barriers that are not necessarily holding black folks back, but that are, again, slack a veteran on the barrier, that is preventing more black folks getting the opportunity to, not just experience just any coffee, but to experience high-quality coffee or specialty coffee?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. As I mentioned we spent a lot of time in coffee shops, but that didn't happen until we were in our 20s as traveling professionals and needing a landing spot to host meetings or just kind of decompress, if you will. That wasn't the case in the neighborhoods that I grew up in. There were no coffee houses. It was a bunch of other businesses, but definitely not ones that were serving specialty coffee. You may have some breakfast nooks or some delis, if you will, that served coffee, but no destination for the coffee lover to call its own.

Rod Johnson:

To answer your question, I think it's access, the reason why certain communities, certain demographics, are not partaking is because they can't. There's no way for them to do so. And that's pretty much why we exist is that we wanted to make sure that specialty coffee was accessible.

Rod Johnson:

So rather than creating a coffee shop, we made sure that our products were available in retail. So simply by checking something off your grocery list, you can ultimately upgrade your daily ritual. And it's a little bit unfair, if you will, but it's that problem, like I said, is what spawned or sparked us to start our business. And you start to see a lot more specialty coffee brands becoming more accessible in non-traditional forms. You have online subscriptions, you have, again, available at retail. That does then allow people to participate in a better and more elevated tasting experience on something that they do every day.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. So the level of thought that you all put into this is unreal, because you're really checking every box. You're thinking about the entire consumer journey, which a lot of coffee companies may not from beginning to end, right? Do they even drink coffee? If they do drink coffee, what kind of coffee could they be drinking? How do we allow them to enjoy, make sure that they are getting... to know that they're getting high-quality coffee? How can we make them feel it and make them understand it? Their dollar means more than just buying a bag of coffee, and it's going back to progressing the youth. I think that the thought and the concept that you have taken into your company is amazing.

Rod Johnson:

Thank you.

Gio Fillari:

It is so holistic that it allows you to tell a story, and it also allows other companies and other brands to want to work with you and to elevate your story as well. And the collab that you all have is unbelievable from Ben & Jerry's, the NBA. I mean, what [crosstalk 00:18:27]-

Rod Johnson:

It's surreal, man. I definitely agree with that.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. So when the league gets... I had dreams of playing in the NBA for a brief moment, you know what I mean? But from my line of work, I get to work with them in a different capacity. But when the league is knocking on your door, they're like, "Hey, let's collab and make something." Out of all the collaborations with the partnerships that you have had, what do you feel have been the most significant to you? Not just to BLK & Bold, but just to you?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. So similar to you, I definitely had hoop dreams. And those were cut short once I stopped growing and realized that I was not LeBron James. So I had to find another way to work with the NBA. And to your point, when they came knocking, it was very validating for us that there's an appetite for our type of business, a business that is consumer focused. We take a consumer forward approach with the way that we source, that we are focused on community with the fact of us giving back to different organizations. And we're authentic and we have a non-pretentious voice where we are of the people. And I think that entities like the NBA, that's attractive to them as they look to forge down a different path and continue to connect with their consumers.

Rod Johnson:

So that one, like I said, was very gratifying, because not only does it check off those boxes, but the fact that they believe so much in a partnership that they're also contributing to the organizations that we've deemed as pledge partners is the cherry on top. So with the sale of any of our NBA licensed products, right now we have one blend called The WarmUp. So anytime that you buy The WarmUp, essentially you'll be doubling your impact to the community, because the NBA believes that so much into that social impact mission.

Rod Johnson:

So I would say that one is probably the most personally gratifying. But when I think about, on a brand level, it has to be Ben & Jerry's, because they are... One is Ben and Jerry's, right?

Gio Fillari:

[crosstalk 00:20:49]

Rod Johnson:

[crosstalk 00:20:49] Everyone loves Ben & Jerry's, and they walk it like they talk it. They are the premier B Corp. They're on the forefront of the right social justice issues, and they're making... they're on the right side of history most of the time. And those are the type of partnerships that we want to align ourselves to. So when they reached out with the idea for us to collaborate on a cold brew ice cream that was also going to be attached to promoting a very necessary piece of legislation, there was no way that we could say no. It puts our brand in a different conversation and one that we want to be in.

Rod Johnson:

And so having that partnership under our belt I'm very grateful, because like I said, it's something that you dream about. And the fact that it comes to fruition and you hear people say, "Oh, man, we really enjoyed that ice cream." We really enjoy the fact that we learn more about the people's response as a result of this flavor collaboration. Like I said, it puts us over the moon.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. And you're also when you consider Ben & Jerry's, you're also in the same space as Colin Kaepernick who is-

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

... also has a collab with Ben and Jerry's, right?

Rod Johnson:

That's crazy when I think about that. I wouldn't have guessed it. I can't say that we drew this up, but, again, it just validates that there's an appetite for our business. Consumers are looking to shop more with brands that stand for something other than just selling your product. Everybody's selling your product. Okay, great. Now what, right? What are you doing with those proceeds? How are you know being reciprocal to the communities of your consumers? How are you supporting the producers of the product? Yeah, I'm just grateful. Like I said, that we are checking off those boxes and consumers have a place to shop in the event that they're looking to shop their values.

Gio Fillari:

A hundred percent. And I think... So my professional life, my day-to-day I'm in the marketing space and we are always trying to figure out what does a consumer value? And Gen Z and Gen Alpha, as you move further and further down and get younger and younger and younger, people care about what these companies stand for. It's not just, okay, you make a good product, but what are you standing for? Especially now a coffee, right, where you're making good coffee, but how are you treating everyone along the production line? How are you sourcing your coffee? How are you paying the wages for your employees or your baristas at the coffee shop? That stuff matters, right?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

And it always mattered, but now more than ever. The pandemic, it has shed light on a lot of things, and the amount of coffee companies and these coffee organizations that have populated to really bubble to the top, the companies that are doing the right thing, but also shedding light on those who need to make changes. Because, ultimately, people want to work with people who are doing the right thing in and out. Naturally they gravitate towards those that are, so.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Absolutely. You touched on a great point. The past couple of years, it has been the magnifying glass on... we had no choice, but to look, right? We didn't have any other distractions. And there's a difference between authenticity and performative allyship. You have those businesses that are looking to make a difference and really care about the causes that they promote, and then you have others that are just responding to social pressure.

Rod Johnson:

And I think that today's consumer is a little bit more savvy, that they can see through the nonsense. They're able to go like, "Okay, I know that you're just doing this for the moment versus this other organization that is doing this because it's who they are, it's embedded in their DNA." We'll start to see the companies that are authentic, that are genuine about their efforts. They'll continue to have success in the long run.

Gio Fillari:

Exactly. If you don't have to make wholesale changes to automatically become authentic, then you wouldn't have much to worry about. It's some companies and some coffee shops that they may have created their company on a foundational pillar that just may resonate with a lot of people. And you mentioned a great point as well as that performative allyship, where here in Portland, so a good friend of mine, Ian Williams, owner of Deadstock coffee.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, yeah. I'm familiar with them.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. He was talking about during the pandemic, early in the pandemic where there was the push to start supporting black businesses, which you should always support black business [inaudible 00:25:57], but there was a, ooh, it might have been... I'm not sure when. Oh, I think it was, actually, yeah, I think it was February, actually, 2020. I think it was actually during Black History Month where a number of companies were just coming out of nowhere, coming out of left field, wanted to work with them. And I believe he started just saying, "Hey, hit me up in March," or, "Hit me up in a month," just to see who would hit him up. And those would be the companies that he would want to work with just because they actually followed through. But they also aren't just coming along during the appropriate month in their minds.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. We are fortunate enough, as the people where Deadstock and the few others are fortunate enough to be able to say no. I'm empathetic to those who are not, but I just want people to be mindful that it exists. That there are some companies out there that are just looking to tag along for the moment so that they can get the heat off their back, if they will, or they can look good for that moment in time, if you will. The due diligence is on us to be able to sift through and make sure that people are genuine and trying to partner with us.

Gio Fillari:

Speaking of partnerships, you have a lot of entities coming at BLK & Bold wanting to work with you all. What would be a dream collab or partnership for you that you would like to have one day, or for [crosstalk 00:27:26]-

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

... even from a brand sense?

Rod Johnson:

I thought about this deeply, and the one that continues to bubble to the top... you're very intimate with them, and that would be working with working with a Nike or working with a Jordan brand. When we think about progressive organizations and people and entities that really stand by their staff, their employees, their clients, Nike really epitomizes that. I would love to see some Mocha 3s be inspired by one of our brews. So as a sneakerhead, that would be one partnership that I would love to see come to fruition.

Rod Johnson:

In addition to that, if I, again, think about it on a brand level, what I think would be good for it, an ideal partnership, Ben & Jerry's was it, that was kind of on the vision board. I don't know what organization in particular that I'm looking to partner with next, but it will have to be one that has some aligned values in particular. That's something that's very important to us.

Rod Johnson:

Also an organization that will help elevate the lifestyle piece of our business. We like to consider our sales a lifestyle brand and whatever strategic partnership that we decide to partake in going forward. I'm hoping that it gives us another step in that direction of being a lifestyle brand. So I would say those are the... that's the lens, at least, that I'm looking through when I'm looking for the next type of partnership for BLK & Bold.

Gio Fillari:

That's what's up. Yeah. So, obviously, a lot of things that I'm bad about as well, when you talk about the intersection of coffee and footwear and just coffee and this coffee culture, right?

Rod Johnson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gio Fillari:

So, first off, if you had to choose a shoe as the silhouette, a Nike shoe please, if you had to choose a Nike shoe as a silhouette of a collab that you would have or inspired shoe, which one would it be?

Rod Johnson:

Okay. Can I answer both Nike and Jordan?

Gio Fillari:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rod Johnson:

Okay, cool. All right. So if I were to go Jordan, I would say the Jordan 12s. That in my head would love to see how a collaboration will manifest in the form of a Jordan 12. And-

Gio Fillari:

How, really quick. So how would that look? So you have the upper, you have a pat 12; you said 12, right?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, that's what I said.

Gio Fillari:

Sorry. Really quick. I thought about the 11 really quick. Let's look at the 12, how would that 12 look? What colors are we thinking? What would that look like?

Rod Johnson:

Man. So I had some 12s on yesterday. I wish I wore them again today, because then I would just look at them. But I'm thinking that the rubber sole, maybe that has... I wouldn't want the mocha to be so prominent. I would want it to be complementary to the shoe. So maybe that inside flap, it's gold on this year's, or rather last year's release of the 12s. I think they were called the Royalty 12s or whatever. But that gold flap, if that were a mocha color? So still with the white upper part and... Hmm. What then would the rubber sole be?

Rod Johnson:

I don't know. I guess it would have to be kind of a mocha color. Why not? Let's just make that mocha color as well, maybe a darker mocha color within a lighter, maybe like a complementary brown, if you will, on the inside flap with the white top. I think that'd be a cool shoe with some white laces.

Gio Fillari:

That'd be amazing. And you have to have a matching bag on the design too, right?

Rod Johnson:

Absolutely. And that would be dope. So that's what I would do on the Jordan side. On the Nike side, man, probably some Air Maxes, some...

Gio Fillari:

[inaudible 00:31:47]

Rod Johnson:

You can't go wrong, which ones?

Gio Fillari:

95s?

Rod Johnson:

95s? That's all I'll kind of go with, maybe some 95s. Yeah. That, I would want to see that. It's so many different panels on there. I would have to just sit down and play with that, but I would like to see some coffee-inspired Air Max 95s. That would be dope.

Gio Fillari:

That would be insane. So on the flip side of that, if you had to come up with a name of a blend that was footwear inspired, what would it be called?

Rod Johnson:

Oh, man. Okay. So this is kind of our bag. So we pride ourselves on our naming conventions. So BLK & Bold is the company name. Then we got The WarmUp for the NBA collab.

Gio Fillari:

Rise & Grnd.

Rod Johnson:

We got Rise & Grnd. Oh man. For some shoes? Gosh.

Gio Fillari:

I know I put you on the spot.

Rod Johnson:

You're putting me on the spot right now, man. Gio, let me get back to you on that-

Gio Fillari:

Yeah, that's cool.

Rod Johnson:

... because my brain is going [crosstalk 00:32:45]-

Gio Fillari:

It's all good. Don't worry about it.

Rod Johnson:

I will have to play some word association, but I want to come up with that.

Gio Fillari:

You know what I mean? Take your time, get the notepad out. Got to do what you got to do. You're all good.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. But that's amazing. I talk about this with Ian all the time, but... and it kind of comes through in some of the work that I get to do, but there are so many similarities between footwear and coffee. From how the presentation is in the packaging, to how you have the coffee industry has their individuals who are... I don't want to say snobs, but who desire more of a refined taste. And the whole process of how things, of how the process of coffee works. The same thing with footwear. You got sneakerheads, you

have coffeeheads. They often get associated as having a uppity attitude, kind of know-it-alls, but at the end of the day, they just have an appreciation for the coffee. They have appreciation for the footwear.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Hey, one more thing on the footwear thing, you know what would be cool is if the bag or the box in which those shoes came in had a burlap bag type of feel to it. Or even incorporating a burlap bag into the footwear. So to your point, so much overlap, so many different directions. But you touched on something on having the elitist, if you will, and those who are just the commoners. We exist for people wherever they are on that spectrum. So if you're just introduced to coffee, you're like, "Hey, I just want to drink it because I got a road trip and I don't want to fall asleep," or someone who is really into the flavor notes and the scoring and the sourcing aspects, we have something for them as well. So it's a, again, we exist for people regardless of what their experience with coffee has been.

Gio Fillari:

I think the importance of that is so high because it allows the consumer to feel they belong.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

Especially people of color, right? Where black folks, they don't see it in their neighborhoods at all growing up, depending on where they are. So the feeling that you belong in a coffee shop, or you belong in this "coffee community" at any level of where you are as a coffee consumer is vital because it makes them feel confident in what they're drinking. It makes them feel like they are not going to be ridiculed by not understanding something.

Gio Fillari:

That's a barrier that I felt when I first started drinking coffee was going to these coffee shops and not really knowing what to order. If I'm at a big chain and I order a sugary drink, that's one thing. But if I go into this minimalist coffee shop down the block and they have four things on the menu, and it just says "plus milk" on some of them, and I'm like they don't even have prices next to it? I'm like, "What am I ordering?"

Rod Johnson:

Right.

Gio Fillari:

And that as the coffee shop or coffee company, they have a... it's a two-way go. They have two opportunities here. They can make a customer for life, or they can make a hater for life, because at the end of the day, they can really allow someone to understand the finer points and the finer things of coffee, so.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. And I never understood why people will take that approach. That doesn't make sense to me, this idea of-

Gio Fillari:

Elitism.

Rod Johnson:

... elitism, right? Just to be exclusionary, right? You're on the outside. You don't know you are less than or I'm going to belittle you, because that just doesn't make sense to me. I think that we all benefit once we let our guards down, because in all actuality we're ignorant to something, right? Nobody knows it all. You can walk into any arena and feel like the low person on the totem pole.

Rod Johnson:

So I just never really... I can't wrap my mind around why people, and then coffee houses in particular or coffee companies in particular, take that approach. But to that point, they can find a home with us. So one day they can come feel a sense of belonging with BLK & Bold.

Gio Fillari:

[inaudible 00:37:04] percent. And not only that, but they can also help giving back. So talk a little bit about the give-back component. 5% goes towards youth needs. Do you have a story that resonates with you the most where you were able to see the impact among kids based off of your give-back from BLK & Bold?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, absolutely. So there are a few. We support 15 organizations across America. They have different disciplines or different focal points. Some are predicated on teaching kids about the arts. Some, they exist to give kids coding skills or actual laptops for them to conduct work outside of the classroom. Then there are others that teach kids skills around urban farming or conservation. The goal was for us to just pour into the community across many different spectrums.

Rod Johnson:

One story in particular that stands out to us, or stands out to me rather, is it comes from City Growers in New York City. So they're an urban farming organization that really instills this love and affinity for agriculture into inner city kids. We were able to help them meet their fundraising goal last year as a result of our contribution. They use that money for a variety of things. It was teaching virtual classes. Because with the inconsistency and COVID, and how that's been impacting whether we have in-person events or not, they were able to invest in software and materials for kids to still continue more on that journey of discovery and of appreciation of agriculture, despite not being in-person.

Rod Johnson:

In addition to that, they were able to make investments to improve that in-person experience, buy more crops to grow, and expanding the actual space in which they teach these classes. They're just doing amazing work up there in New York, and the fact that we are a part of that story is something that's very gratifying for us.

Gio Fillari:

Amazing. How do you go about figuring out which groups and organizations you want to work with? You said there's about 15 of them?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. So it, one, we wanted to be in markets where our products are sold so that we can bring it full circle. You'll know that by buying this coffee in your local Target or Whole Foods, or wherever you buy groceries, that it's actually supporting an organization that's in your own backyard. So it has to be, like I said, in a market where we have distribution. Obviously, it has to focus on supporting youth in need. And then lastly that they actually care, that they are trying to show or trying to instill some sense of value that they don't just exist, but they exist for a greater purpose.

Rod Johnson:

I think you just kind of feel that through conversations. Obviously, there are reports that you can request, different annual reports or other anecdotes. But we try to vet them out by having a personal connection and really understanding if their mission statement is something that everybody in the organization has bought in, because we look at our contributions as investments. And if an organization checks off those boxes, then we will happily adopt them as a pledge partner going forward.

Gio Fillari:

Amazing. You hit on a number of good things. There are organizations that are on the surface doing the right things, but then underneath they may just be not necessarily apathetic, but just whatever about the cause. But then there are those organizations that really truly care about the cause, really passionate about it, and those are the companies that you want to work with closely-

Rod Johnson:

Absolutely.

Gio Fillari:

... [crosstalk 00:41:13] You also mentioned where [inaudible 00:41:18] purchase the most. Whereabouts in the country do you see your highest volume of sales?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. It's primarily in major markets, and that's due to our distribution relationship with Target. So New York, Chicago, Southern California, Charlotte, ironic enough. And I'm trying to think what's the fifth one that rounds it out, the New Jersey/Philadelphia area, that's kind of our top targets, if you will. Des Moines, of course, because it's where we're headquartered, and then a few other major markets. But those are the top five where we see a lot of foot traffic or just a lot of traffic in general.

Gio Fillari:

That's what's up. Yeah. Those are key markets for sure. Right?

Rod Johnson:

Absolutely.

Gio Fillari:

You know what I mean? Those are places that you definitely want to have a presence in, and obviously Des Moines that's where HQ's at. Right?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

So throughout all the accomplishments and, obviously, the give-back is a major accomplishment, what is one that you're most proud of when it comes to BLK & Bold? What is that? It's going to be hard, right? I'm not asking you to pick children here, but I kind of am, right?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

So what are some things that are like.... I mean what's something that you really look at, just look at yourself personally, and maybe with P as well, something that you're really like, "Yo, this is amazing?"

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. The fact that we, throughout this whole pandemic, that we haven't had to turn the lights off, so kudos to our ecosystem for continuously supporting us through this tumultuous time, and so that's part of it. But then the second part is that because we have kept the lights on, we've been able to provide jobs for our local community. We, in theory, are supporting 25 families. We have about 25 employees, and the fact that they are relying on us to feed their loved ones is a responsibility that we don't take lightly.

Rod Johnson:

But on the flip side of that, we are grateful to be in this position to be able to do that. So I would say just existing through a troubling time and being a resource for some people in our community is probably the most satisfying for me.

Gio Fillari:

When you put it that way, that's definitely a major accomplishment. You have 25, essentially 25 families, that you're helping support right through everything that you are all doing with the brand. It's truly amazing.

Rod Johnson:

Thank you.

Gio Fillari:

But you probably got this question quite often as well. What did you learn the most during the pandemic while running a business?

Rod Johnson:

Man, learned a lot. I mean-

Gio Fillari:

We're still going through the pandemic type of thing.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Right. We're still in it. I learned that... Hmm. That there is always a time to be scrappy. Being scrappy will never go out of style. That was on full display these past couple of years. That's how I've always governed myself is to be resourceful and don't take no for an answer. I think that that was something that I had to really tap into over these past couple of years, because despite the many accomplishments that we've been able to amass to this point, we got a lot of doors shut in our face very early on. Still to this day it's not a walk in the park. That hasn't deterred us. So just being mindful to be persistent and to be consistent is something that I learned will never go out of style.

Gio Fillari:

Ever. I've been watching the Genius documentary on Netflix.

Rod Johnson:

Oh yeah? [inaudible 00:45:25]

Gio Fillari:

[inaudible 00:45:25] And luckily he recorded everything. He had a cameraman with him, but he was playing Jesus Walks. He was playing through the wire to people and they were just looking at him like, "Okay." But fast forward a couple decades later, these are profound songs. These are culturally relevant pieces of art that we uplift so high, but no one knows that behind the scenes that he was being told, no, and that the door slammed in his face.

Gio Fillari:

And I think it goes back again to those barriers that people may or may not know that exist and the fact that you all, as a company, still see that. It really sheds light on how amazing the work that has been done that you all put out is really transcending through the hardships and through the pandemic, through everything. And these are stories that people may not know, so.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. No, that Genius documentary is truly inspiring, man.

Gio Fillari:

It is.

Rod Johnson:

I haven't watched a second episode yet; I'm definitely planning to do that this weekend. But, yeah, that's why Kanye will continue to get some type of reaction from us, because his story resonated with us from very early on, and we just want to see the best for him. So he kind of has that love/hate... or we have that love/hate relationship with him, but the documentary was a great reminder of what a love started.

Gio Fillari:

Exactly. And I know that he's a polarizing person, but there's a lot that you can learn from him. But you also kind of admire as well.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Gio Fillari:

Now, as a big business person a lot of people look up to you, a lot of people want to model their career and their livelihood off you, but who are some people that you admire or who are someone that you look up to?

Rod Johnson:

Oh, gosh. Well, who immediately comes to mind? I'll stick with music is Jay-Z, and it's less about the lyrics and how great of a rapper he is, but it's more so the evolution. Yeah, so I think it's more so his evolution. It shows that you don't have to be pigeonholed into one profession or one means of income, if you will. He's definitely diversified himself over time, and that's something that I draw inspiration from.

Rod Johnson:

In addition to that, I draw inspiration from different family members. Seeing how they've been able to overcome certain circumstances is what I carry along and use as motivation going forward.

Gio Fillari:

Sorry about the header... plug my laptop to.

Rod Johnson:

It's all good. It's all good.

Gio Fillari:

Yeah. Fun fact. I sat next to Jay-Z in a suite at the LA Rams/San Francisco 49ers game.

Rod Johnson:

Dope.

Gio Fillari:

I gave him the head nod and he gave me one back, so.

Rod Johnson:

Okay. All right. That's dope. That's dope. People know how big of a Jay-Z fan I am. And they take bets on what my reaction would be if I were to ever meet him. Some people are like, "Is he going to fanboy out?" or, "Is he going to be too cool?" I don't know. I might have to take your approach and just give him a slight head nod. I wouldn't want to go crazy.

Gio Fillari:

No. You wouldn't go crazy at all, not even a little bit?

Rod Johnson:

I don't know. Maybe on the inside. I wouldn't let him see it, though.

Gio Fillari:

[crosstalk 00:49:20] What is your favorite Jay-Z song?

Rod Johnson:

Oh, song? Allure.

Gio Fillari:

Allure.

Rod Johnson:

My favorite Jay-Z song, Allure. I love that song, man. I think it checks off all the Jay-Z boxes. Dope lyrics, good collaboration with Pharrell. You got the jazzy type of music that he's flowing over and it's on one of the greatest albums of all time, The Black Album. So I will go with Allure today. It might change next week. Next week, it might be Dead Presidents. You never know.

Gio Fillari:

I like... so it's super random. It's not even on his album, it's actually Memphis Bleek's album, Dear Summer.

Rod Johnson:

Oh, yeah. It classic.

Gio Fillari:

It's so smooth. [inaudible 00:50:03]

Rod Johnson:

That's [crosstalk 00:50:05]

Gio Fillari:

It's so smooth.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah, man.

Gio Fillari:

It's coffee-listening music, right? There's a genre where you listen to this when you're sipping coffee. And I think it doesn't matter what the artist is, everyone has that one song that's a little bit smooth, a little bit more mellow.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. That's a good coffee playlist addition. I think I'm going to go ahead and add Dear Summer to my coffee playlist.

Gio Fillari:

When you all are listening to coffee, what is the... this is super specific, super niche, but you literally own a coffee company. So when you talk about music and drinking coffee, what are some of the things that you listen to? When drinking coffee, having that morning... if you do listen to music at all, it may be dead silence around you, but do you have a morning playlist? Do you have a kind of [crosstalk 00:51:01]-

Rod Johnson:

It's a gumbo of things, it depends on the day. Say, you might have some jazzy tunes in there. That little bit of R&B, like some Cleo Sol, or maybe some Ari Lennox. Like I said, a little bit of Jay-Z maybe some Kendrick. It depends on if I'm drinking black coffee and I need to be amped up, I might throw on, Alright. If I'm just trying to-

Gio Fillari:

That's my favorite, I love it.

Rod Johnson:

If I'm just trying to mellow it out, that I might throw on Allure and everything else goes away.

Gio Fillari:

That is so we... I met P back in 2018. It was Sprudge, actually. We had the Black Coffee Podcast and he flew out. And we all had intro songs and mine was Alright by Kendrick. [crosstalk 00:51:49] and I had the double cup of coffee that we had in backstage. And I'm like, "This is cool, man."

Rod Johnson:

That's dope.

Gio Fillari:

All right. One more for you before we let you go. What is next for BLK & Bold? You mentioned your vision board. You pretty much checked all the boxes off on the vision board. Sometimes people can just say, "Hey, we made it. We got the Ben & Jerry's collab. We got the collab with the league," and you can just kind of just kick your feet up now, but other people can decide to create another vision board, make more goals, bigger collabs, bigger give back. What's next for y'all.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. So we like to consider ourselves an innovation hub of coffee and tea-based beverages. Our formal name is BLK & Bold Specialty Beverages. We did that very deliberately so that it gives us flexibility in

what we introduce to market. So later this year, we're going to take another step in that direction. The first step was to partner with Steeped Coffee. You may be familiar with them-

Gio Fillari:

Yes.

Rod Johnson:

... the individually wrapped, fully compostable coffee sachets. Perfect for when you're on the go. So, yeah, that was the first step. So now we're going to continue forging down that path into the single-serve and bring in some newness in that regard, both on the hot and cold side. So this summer, like I said, we'll be releasing a few new products and giving you different ways that you can enjoy our coffee, despite whether you're at home or on the go.

Gio Fillari:

Love it. You mentioned the whoever makes a little sachets bags, brilliant, right?

Rod Johnson:

Yeah.

Gio Fillari:

Because it's super easy. And then a tea, right, coffee and all that stuff. Brilliant. Listen, Rod, it was a pleasure to have you on this call chopping it up with us for nearly an hour. Any final words you want to throw out? Any shout-outs, anything you want to plug, let the people know.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. I mean, one, Gio, thank you. Appreciate it. Glad that we got a chance to chop it up equally. Just be on the lookout for, like I said, that new innovation that'll be dropping this summer. But in the meantime, we just released our individual NBA bags for The WarmUp. So we got six teams or six new uniforms, if you will-

Gio Fillari:

Love that you had the Warriors in there.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. So we got the Warriors, got-

Gio Fillari:

Let's go.

Rod Johnson:

... [crosstalk 00:54:26]. We have the Bulls, the Nicks, the Nets, the Phoenix Suns, and who am I missing? The Lakers, how can I forget the Lakers? So that's the first edition of those individual team bags. So not only will you get a great cup of coffee, you can actually show it off and show off your affinity for your favorite team.

Gio Fillari:

That is exactly brilliant. And I'm surprised, are you a Pacers fan or?

Rod Johnson:

No, I'm not a Pacers fan. Actually, I am a Lakers fan. So I grew up a Bulls fan. Gary is 30 minutes outside of Chicago.

Gio Fillari:

That is true, yeah.

Rod Johnson:

MJ retired. So it's like, all right, I need to watch somebody. And Kobe Bryant, he was drafted in '96.

Gio Fillari:

He was.

Rod Johnson:

He was the young, new kid on the block. So I just kind of gravitated towards him. And then 20 years later, I was rooting for the Lakers every year. So I'm kind of grandfathered in that. So it's more so of that.

Gio Fillari:

Okay. All right. I was thinking maybe there's a Reggie Miller tie or something that or-

Rod Johnson:

Oh, no man. People in northwest Indiana, we actually hate Indianapolis sports. We're more so Chicago, so the Bears, the White Sox, the Bulls. We don't root for the Colts. We don't root for the Pacers. It's just like, eh. It's kind of like a whole different state, if you will, despite us being in Indiana.

Gio Fillari:

That does make actually a lot of sense. Because since Chicago is so close that, yeah. No, that makes total sense, from the Bulls to the White Sox. Bears have been struggling a little bit, but Lakers not so much. They're struggling, but for San Francisco, huge 49ers fan, so I'm hurting on this last season.

Rod Johnson:

Oh, yeah, but you got to give it up to Jimmy G., man. I mean that-

Gio Fillari:

I love Jimmy G.

Rod Johnson:

[crosstalk 00:56:14]

Gio Fillari:

There are a lot people who approve. There are so many... Oh, you got me started. I know that [inaudible 00:56:18]. So I am huge Jimmy Garoppolo fan. A lot of people were like, "Hey, he's not putting up the numbers, he's not a great quarterback," but this man wins two full seasons with the 49ers. And they went to the Super Bowl one year and they were a couple plays away from going back to a Super Bowl.

Rod Johnson:

Exactly. Exactly. Come on, Jimmy G., I don't understand the hate, but I just look at the wins; that's all that matters, right? Winning cures everything.

Gio Fillari:

There are teams that would trade away a lot to have that amount of wins-

Rod Johnson:

Of course.

Gio Fillari:

... right? And I know this will turn us to a sports spot at this point. The Warriors, obviously, they've been winning for the several seasons in a row, so that's been fun, and Giants as well. But, yeah, so San Francisco through and through. I'm 34 years old, I'm a grown man, but you know I still get sick when [crosstalk 00:57:16] loses. I always say that I'm going to Spain without the S, and I'm going to pain is what I'm at, but.

Rod Johnson:

I love it.

Gio Fillari:

We appreciate it. Again, look out for BLK & Bold. Go get The Warmup, all six bags of them, and give them a follow on the 'gram as well as Twitter as well, I imagine that they're on.

Rod Johnson:

Yeah. All social platforms, BLK & Bold, B-L-K.

Gio Fillari:

[crosstalk 00:57:43] more bags, stock up. I got the Rise & Grnd blend. We've been loving it. Yeah. Thank you for listening to Seed To Cup podcast on Sprudge network. Have a good day.