

PROFILE

Taking the

For most corporate workers, coffee is something we drink to get us through the long days. But for these three sisters, coffee is more than just fuel, it's their driving force.



The Velluto Nero sisters at their cafe on Clarence Street

Plunge



Text: Yasmin Newman Photography: Stephen Ostrer

In what was once a concrete shell on Clarence Street, empty and lifeless, is now a bustling city cafe, alluring more bleary-eyed CBD workers by the day with the mellifluous smells of freshly-roasted coffee. Funny, it's a bit like a siren calling at Velluto Nero – owned and run by three beautiful sisters, it's hard to forget the image. But despite the demure look of these women, and their softly spoken voices and dainty frames, you soon realize that they're quite the powerhouse – individually, and even more so as a team.

"We all came from corporate backgrounds," explains Aileen, the youngest of the three. "Gina from a law background, Vicky from science and accounting and myself from marketing." Vicky, who draws upon her scientific expertise in her new role as Velluto Nero roaster, laughs, "We often joke that we gave up our nine-to-fivers for five-to-niners!" Gina also laughs; "Our customers are mainly corporate, so I suppose we're still in the corporate world, only at a different level!"

These girls like to laugh often, and you get the sense that their plunge into this new world has come with great ease. Certainly looking at their credentials, it would be hard to think otherwise. Just seven weeks after they launched, Velluto Nero won the Golden Bean Award. Five months later, they were named Champion Espresso Title at the Royal Easter Show, a prize rarely awarded.

But, like any new business, the experience has been a learning curve. "We basically started from scratch," explains Aileen. "While we've really been able to make the most of our different skill sets, our backgrounds weren't in coffee and we have had to deal with things we never had to in our prior lives." Gina agrees, "Managing our time has been a new challenge – from running the cafe, roasting and packaging the beans, retail sales and our online component, it's almost four businesses in one!" In fact, Gina takes this opportunity to excuse herself. The shop is already closed but, as she tells me, she's got to get the online sales out the door before the post leaves.

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But why leave the corporate world for coffee?

"It probably started with us wanting to go into business together," says Aileen. "Our parents are quite entrepreneurial, so we've got it in our blood. But the reason we chose this industry comes down to common ground - everything we love revolves around food, and particularly coffee!"

Vicky, who I'm told drinks the most coffee of the three ("It's one of the perks of the job!") elaborates; "Coffee is one of the most fascinating products. It's a bit like traveling – the more you travel, the more you realise you haven't seen."

It seems traveling is another favourite the threesome should add to their list who, prior to moving to Australia from New Zealand, journeyed throughout Australia, the U.S., U.K. and Italy over a two-year period before launching their brand. It was all in the name of serious coffee R&D they tell me... plus a little fun. "It's been tough work!" jokes Vicky.

And although she may be joking, truthfully, juggling trips into three full-time work schedules and high-powered careers would have proven more than a little tough.

Vicky takes the break in the laughter and turns serious for a moment; "You have to 110% believe in what you're doing. For us it was about having direct control over the quality of the product we were producing, serving and selling something you loose when you rely on someone else. For us that meant creating something from scratch and going from the ground up."

Despite the casual conversation and constant giggles, this trio's dedication to their business is glaringly clear and, like a really good espresso, has given a much-needed joint to the coffee industry. "We wanted to do something different. Being the only in-store coffee roaster in the heart of the CBD, I think we've brought freshness to the city. Plus a touch of modernity! A lot of coffee brands are still quite traditional."

Their youthful touch, as seen in everything from their black-and-blue packaging to the store's sleek interior, seems to be hitting a chord with office workers whose response, from the beginning, has been resounding. "Our customers are fantastic! A lot of them actually tell us that they've changed their routes to work. They even get off at a different station for our coffee! When you get that kind of feedback... well, we've been really fortunate."

Fortune? Maybe. But with these three sisters it has definitely been a lot of hard work and preparation. But as they greet me goodbye with their wide smiles and beaming eyes, I only wish hard work was as easy for the rest of us. At least we have coffee to keep us going.

For a freshly ground, kick-start to the day, head to Velluto Nero, Shop 3, 259 Clarence Street, Sydney, 02 9268 0755