

Refugee-staffed coffee shop in Calif. counters immigration backlash

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Except for co-founders Rachel Taber and Douglas Hewitt, 1951 Coffee is entirely staffed by refugees, asylum seekers and special immigrant visa holders. The coffee shop is located in Berkeley, California. Photo courtesy of 1951 Coffee Company

A social icebreaker was perhaps the first sign that 1951 Coffee, a new coffee shop in Berkeley, California, is not your typical latte stop.

“Where are you from?” Nazira Babori, age 26, a barista-in-training, asked her co-worker, Tedros Abraha.

“Eritrea,” Abraha, age 31, said. “Do you know Eritrea?”

“Hmmm,” Babori said. “Is it democratic?”

With the exception of co-founders Rachel Taber and Douglas Hewitt, 1951 Coffee is entirely staffed by refugees, asylum seekers and special immigrant visa holders. The nonprofit establishment has baristas who left Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran, Nepal, Bhutan, Uganda and Syria after facing political, religious or ethnic persecution. It’s a coffee shop with a cause. It gives recent arrivals training and

employs them in customer-facing roles so they can practice speaking English and engage with the community.

And, while it's still in its early days, its founders believe it stands as evidence of the welcoming nature of American communities. It's a contrast to the hard-line President Donald Trump has taken on immigration.

"It's been difficult and tense," said Taber.

California Coffee Shop Staffed Entirely By Refugees

She and Hewitt both previously worked for the International Rescue Committee and now run the 1951 Coffee Company, a refugee advocacy organization of which the coffee shop is a part. When the coffee shop was announced last year, some questioned why they are creating jobs for refugees instead of those born in America.

"There's this sense of, 'Why aren't we helping our own?'" Taber said. "But just because we're doing this doesn't mean we're taking away from programs for Americans. There's room for everyone."

With immigration thrust into the spotlight during the recent election cycle, she sees it as an opportunity to educate. Many Americans, for example, think of refugees as outsiders who haven't yet arrived in the country, Taber said. But thousands of refugees are resettled in California every year, and thousands more are already living and working as locals.

Los Angeles County last year resettled 2,250 refugees, according to the California Department of Social Services. In the East Bay area counties of Alameda and Contra Costa, more than 400 refugees from Afghanistan, Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran and Syria settled between October 2015 and September 2016. Those numbers don't include asylum seekers. They aren't as well-documented because many don't receive resettlement services.

Liberal City Sets Trend For Supporting Immigrants

The Bay Area has so far welcomed 1951 Coffee's arrival, with locals patronizing the coffee shop during its soft launch in January and hanging back to ask about its mission. Being in Berkeley — historically known for preferring liberal politics and social change — has also helped.

The coffee shop looks and feels like neighboring trendy coffee houses, serving almond milk lattes, drip coffee and cold brews. But its walls are decorated with information about the struggles of refugees — a feature its founders hope will make customers stop to think.

By its second day, 1951 was experiencing the morning and afternoon rushes typical of coffee shops. "I was a bit nervous today," said Meg Karki, 27, a barista at 1951 who had never worked in a coffee shop before. "But it was fun."

Originally from Bhutan, Karki spent 20 years in a refugee camp in Nepal before resettling in Oakland five years ago. Even though he was eager to work, his lack of work experience in the United States hampered his job hunt. He worked at fast-food joints such as Little Caesar's, where he barely interacted with customers. He also worked at Chipotle and Trader Joe's. But none of those jobs prepared him to work with customers in the way 1951 Coffee has, he said.

Before the coffee shop's opening, every employee received barista training. They also got basic customer service training and attended workshops on workplace and American culture.

"In some cultures, a person might have a job interview and never look their boss in the eye," said Hewitt.

"Whereas in the U.S., if you didn't make eye contact with someone, they'd think something was wrong. We try to prepare them for that."

From Political Prisoner To Neighborhood Barista

The coffee shop pays its baristas \$13 an hour, plus tips and benefits.

"This is one of the best ideas," said Abraha, who resettled in Oakland last August after fleeing Eritrea five years ago, where he had been a political prisoner. His journey took him from Eritrea to Sudan, Angola, Brazil and finally to the United States.

"It's difficult to be a new person in a new country," Abraha said. "But being here, in the U.S., you get respect and recognition. The most important thing is to live with dignity."

For Karki, 1951 Coffee is also a source of purpose and pride. "It's not just a job," he said. "We are helping people, and that makes me happy."

On Day 2, as Karki prepared to leave after his morning shift, the afternoon rush started. "Oh wow," said Hewitt, as 10 customers walked into the coffee shop at the same time. "Do you need my help?" Karki asked. No one heard him over the bustle. He looked at the line, put down his bag and made his way back behind the coffee counter. "I'm gonna help," he said.

Quiz

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. *When the coffee shop was announced last year, some questioned why they are creating jobs for refugees instead of those born in America.*
2. *With immigration thrust into the spotlight during the recent election cycle, she sees it as an opportunity to educate.*
3. *Being in Berkeley — historically known for preferring liberal politics and social change — has also helped.*
4. *They also got basic customer service training and attended workshops on workplace and American culture.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

2 The central ideas of the article are BEST developed by:

- (A) providing background information about the founders of 1951 Coffee
- (B) explaining the difficulties employees of 1951 Coffee have faced as refugees
- (C) illustrating the differences between 1951 Coffee and other coffee shops in Berkeley
- (D) describing the mission of 1951 Coffee and the impact it has on its employees and the community

3 Which answer choice describes a factor that influenced Taber and Hewitt's decision to establish 1951 Coffee?

- (A) awareness of the challenges that confront refugees
- (B) in-depth knowledge of cultural practices around the world
- (C) familiarity with the coffee and customer service industries
- (D) heartfelt desire to bring change to the community of Berkeley

4 Which of the following people quoted in the article would be MOST likely to agree with the following statement?

1951 Coffee is building confidence in its employees while also building connections with the community.

- (A) Meg Karki
- (B) Rachel Taber
- (C) Tedros Abraha
- (D) Douglas Hewitt