



Being the Boss

Ralf Rueller

PICTURES: PIM RINKES

Roots

I was born in the German countryside near the Dutch border, and it was here that I learned the values that define me and the way I run my business. I believe in waves and circles; the things we experience or value at one point in our life will show up again later.

My father was a local postman who earned some extra money as a musician at the weekends so that our family could have a better life, while my mother was born in Berlin. She lost her mother during the war and at the age of seven, was sent by her relatives to a farm in the countryside to have food and schooling. She stayed on that farm for ten years, before starting work in a bakery. During a break one morning, she saw my father passing by on a scooter and waved at him.

Fast forward a few years and I was born, the fourth of five children. As those from larger families will know, this meant that I had a lot of freedom because all the boundaries had been probed by my older siblings. My parents gave me a lot of space to explore my interests, and I felt a great sense of freedom and fairness, knowing that they fully trusted me to walk through life with a strong set of values. I did not grow up in luxury; every time I wanted something, I had to work for it myself. I remember having my heart set on a fancy racing bicycle, so I started delivering newspapers before school and saving up everything I earned. I treasured that bike for years. I think it is ambition and the pleasure of accomplishment that continues to drive me today.

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Another strong childhood memory is that all our food came from our garden. We had an open house to friends, and I remember a lot of baking and cooking; my mother was a great hostess! To keep everything in order in a household of seven, we all had to do our part to clean and keep the house tidy, and even now, when at work at The Barn I think it's important to be respectful and considerate. At the very beginning I established a clear set of values, rules, and serving standards at The Barn, and this has played its part in making us known for integrity and clarity.



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Learning from Down Cycles

My work in finance was related to risk analysis, so I frequently saw bubbles bursting and economies in crisis. I learned a great deal from the mistakes of other people, and seeing previously successful companies fail. Does anybody remember those Nokia phones?

It was tough working in finance during the recession in the '90s. At a young age I was given the chance to run a corporate finance department, which entailed a lot of pressure. I worked day and night at my desk, but saw a lot of family-owned companies go under. I suddenly had doubts whether this was the right profession for me. Every week I called my close friend Julia, who owned the first high-heeled shoe shop in Stuttgart, to have a shoulder to cry on, and one time, she told me: 'Actually, you should embrace the work, and don't call me for another year. Then, if you still feel bad about your job, think about moving on.' So I dedicated the next year to my job, got better, and the success gave me confidence. I stayed in the role for four more years, which taught me something else: Consistency is good because it takes time to learn something; commitment develops depth.

Growing Personality

I left school aged 16 and embarked on an apprenticeship with a German bank. It was a way out of my small town; I like numbers, and I knew that I wanted to live abroad. I worked hard and enjoyed being given responsibilities—I like challenges!—but patience is not my strong suit; I like to get things done immediately. The other day I came across an old school report and saw that my teacher had written, 'Ralf is very twitchy!' This twitchiness is part of my personality; it gives me energy and ideas, and starting a company with a product that I love was a great way to channel my drive. The people with whom I work closely know that they have an impact and that together, we can change things very quickly. That's the upside of running a small business.

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Cultural Impact

If someone were to ask me what country I should have been born in, I would say Japan. The brew bars and attention to detail at The Barn were strongly influenced by the year I spent working there. I like the fact that it's a deeply rooted culture, and that despite being a very modern country, tradition is strong and plays a huge role. Traditions exist for a reason, and I think that instead of tearing them down, we need to make them work for our modern sensibilities. When I think about The Barn I think a bit about how the tradition of going to church used to work as a community space. I think that the coffee shop is an institution that can offer a sense of community in a democratic way; it's somewhere you can come to enjoy coffee and spend time with others, with no strings attached.

Before moving to Berlin, I lived for ten years in London, near Borough Market in South Bank. Monmouth was my temple; it was one of the few places I could find proper bread, good vegetables, and a great cup of coffee in the morning. Five years into my London life, I lost my job in banking. I was suddenly free, and had some savings and a craving to do something more creative. A friend mentioned the strong possibility that there would be acting work for Germans in London, given the obsession of British television with World War Two, so I successfully applied to the Central School of Speech and Drama. My acting period was liberating, if not successful from a commercial viewpoint. Even though I would have never described myself as a banker, my entire working life had trained me to analyse risks, but now, I had to let that go and grasp them.



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Following Love

It was acting that brought me back to Germany. I got bored playing German stereotypes in London, and my method acting skills were considered 'too risky for a production'. Top cast members can explore their roles, while the lower ranks are expected to do as they're told so that there are no delays in production. My agent called one day after what I thought was a great audition for the movie *Defiance*, and told me that the casting office was reluctant to hire me. 'Don't act,' she said. 'They just want your face.' So I left that agent and started moving back and forth between Berlin and London, but quickly lost interest in the craft in Germany. I found it far too rigid, not innovative or daring. Looking back, I was probably never passionate enough to make it in acting.

I met my partner, Andreas, in Berlin. He was the key reason why I moved there, in combination with the fact that after ten years in London, I felt that I had come full circle and was looking for a new challenge. Andreas had a beautiful deli in Berlin, so I started working for him, learning the basics of gastronomy—which involved cleaning a lot of dishes! I still do the dishes at home, while Andreas loves cooking. I had a great two years working with a partner with whom I also lived, but it was intense. I loved every minute of it, but it was time to follow my own vision.

Integrity. Sustainability. Community. Relevance.

I had come to a point in my life when I wanted to create and be in control. I wanted to build something truly special and to do so, it's important not to compromise. Be very clear about who you are and what you are good at, and don't average down; average already exists. This was the birth of The Barn.

I don't believe that much can be achieved by keeping things as they are or thinking about how others would like things to be done. Coco Chanel never thought about how to make a nicer dress with a corset; she liberated women from it by designing something that went against public opinion.

When I started out, specialty coffee was a new product, which meant that I had to create demand and awareness. I did this by not mimicking others or doing what was already out there. You have to dare to be different, accept that not everyone will like what you do, and have a clear vision. Above all, I am a specialist, not a generalist; I offer something that is not available on every corner.

At The Barn, I never compromise on sourcing and serving standards, while I have also striven to share knowledge and build a community around me that trusts the integrity of my vision. All products at The Barn are homemade and fresh, just the way my mother made them. Features of my childhood have reappeared in my café; it's really been a circle. I even use my mother's cake recipe book, and make the sandwiches the way we prepped them at home.

I build close relationships by visiting our coffee growers, paying them well, and being a committed partner. We need each other, and I only work with coffee growers who are ready to embrace quality. When we work together, I see them improving and establishing sustainable coffee businesses; a working relationship is very different to farm tourism. Being German, it is somewhat expected of me to be specific, and I don't shy away from telling farmers to remove plastic, keep their farms clean, look after their workers, and to go the extra mile.



In principle, I don't blend our coffees and I inform customers about terroir, which connects each individual farm with the communities in our cafés. You could think of my coffees as actors and me as giving a stage to enable them to shine. Each actor is allowed his or her own personality as in method acting, by which I mean if a bean is light, floral, or acidic, I don't burn it out; I follow the individual characteristics of each bean.

We teach all our staff members so they are in a position to share farm stories with our customers.



I even send many of our staff on an annual trip to experience coffee farms, which is a huge investment for a small company, but I feel I owe it to the values and principles that I have established. We are all focused on one thing: Relentlessly searching for the perfect cup of coffee.

All our units are fully integrated: Our baristas and brewers give daily feedback on coffee performances, and the roast team perfects our roast profiles, based on what our staff tastes. We don't compromise when we roast, which means that nothing is served that is not

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entirely on point. The Barn is not a branding exercise; we are fully focused on giving our customers a unique experience with coffees. Even our packaging reflects the pure nature of our product, and it's not designed to be particularly Instagrammable. Everybody in my company shares this vision. If The Barn was a stage performance, it would probably be an actor sitting on a simple chair, offering his soul to you. No fancy costume, tricks, or distracting lights; just a pure, memorable performance. ●