





THE STORY OF TWO SEEDS

■ Anna Dai

“Spring hung in the air. The soil is fresh, fertile. In it lay two seeds, side by side.

The first seed said: “I want to grow. I want my roots to extend deep down, so that I may grow high into the air and feel the sun’s nurturing rays. I want to unfurl my leaves and feel the morning dew on my petals.”

And so she did.

The second seed replied: “Now is not the time. What is there below us but darkness? What is there above us but unknown dangers? What if I send my roots into the ground and encounter a rock which breaks my roots? What if I grow into the air and a child pulls me from the ground? No, I will wait.”

And so she waited.

The next day a hen walked around burying her beak in the dirt for food. She found the stray seed, lying in the ground. And so she ate it.”

This is not a story about two seeds, but a parable about opportunity. Why waste the chance to grow and prosper? The seemingly safer alternative is not always so- life after all, does have a tendency to swallow the complacent.



Frankie Chen, part-owner of the Two Seeds Cafe in Ashburton tells me this little parable over a cappuccino in the quiet corner table of a busy Monday lunch service. It seems apt, considering that each of the three owners of the young cafe are currently budding food entrepreneurs, but have everyday jobs. One works in insurance, another in advertising and the third in the automobile industry. "It's been a year already," Frankie says, "a year and no regrets... you gotta be out there." It's clear then, that the minds behind the burgeoning cafe are fertile individuals that nurtured seeds of ambition.

The idea for a cafe was planted a decade ago, when the three co-owners — Frankie, Edmond Li and Chen Tan — were still in high school. Though they had different ambitions, their personalities converged in a complementary and creative way; "There's something in this business for each of us," mulls Frankie. He's the social one. With an enthusiastic presence and dynamic conversational skills, Frankie is the one that ensures that customers leave satiated and satisfied.

"I love talking," he laughs. But Frankie is a man of action too. A trawl through Zomato (previously Urbanspoon) — the online bible for foodies — shows that he takes the time to respond to customer feedback. "Highly recommend for a big breakfast on a Sunday... there's gluten-free options as well, however the bread is a bit tough," says a user called "Gavin". Two Seed's prompt response: "We'll look at our gluten-free bread and investigate other options or methods of preparing. Hoping to see you again soon!" And indeed, they have looked into creating softer gluten-free bread. I've checked. "We make the bread from scratch," Frankie assures me.

It may be a small gesture to respond to individual feedback, but it is an important part of fostering a good relationship with regular customers — especially at Two Seeds. As a cafe on the main street of Ashburton, they rely on locals and word-of-mouth to generate buzz. I ask about the difference between inner-city cafes and ones in the suburb. The owners did after, select their location carefully after scouting several locations, and "filling their stomachs with research," Frankie admits sheepishly.

"We have a local focus," he tells me, "people are excited when there is a new cafe and are eager to support it. We didn't want to be a flash in a pan. We wanted to be sustainable and a source of pride for locals. We want something real." The new owners kept the old name of the cafe "Two Seeds" when they acquired it a year ago to keep a sense of continuity, of familiarity. But they ripped the place apart to redecorate. The result is light, airy but intimate. "Some regulars of the old cafe stepped in and went 'Oh wow, sh--'," he says with a laugh.

Yes, the cafe did go through a drastic makeover when it changed hands. But that old adage still holds true- it's really about the small things. "Before, it was quite dark, quite dingy," Frankie recalls, "customers would tell us they couldn't read their newspapers." And now they can. This is important to Frankie because he wants Two Seeds to be a space where customers are able to relax. He loves it when he sees customers deep in conversation — it is as he says, "A cafe is a place of gathering."

However, the owners also understand that not everyone has the luxury — or indeed wants the luxury — of time. They recognise that some might come in to grab a coffee or juice on the go. And this, once again comes back to the symbolism of the Two Seeds name, and its idea of growth. "There's a diversity behind it, a duality to it," he explains, "that's where we get the idea of fast/slow and dark/light. There's going to be a focus on fresh juices and salads this year for those who just want to grab and go."





It's a smart cafe — the concept is tight and the customer demographic has been meticulously researched. But as many have experienced, what works well on paper does not necessarily translate into real life. That's where Ernest, the in-store manager, comes in. He's your archetypal "people person" with the enthusiastic personality to match. Most importantly though, he's always looking for something to improve. Having worked in hospitality for ten years across four to five cafes, Ernest knows what it takes to keep customers coming back.

"Hospitality must always evolve and grow," he says, "if hospitality doesn't evolve, then people will just move on." Wise words from a man so fresh-faced. Important too, considering that Two Seeds is but one of six cafes along the main street. I ask him about how hospitality has to change and unsurprisingly the answer, once again, is about being meticulous, about the details. "Even holding a door open for someone is a gesture that they might not expect, but appreciate a lot."

"Ernest is fantastic with names," Frankie quips, "some days, he knows 80% of the people in the cafe." Perhaps it's for him that they keep coming back: "Handsome guy," Frankie says. "Getting there," Ernest fires back. If this banter is anything to go by, the general vibe at Two Seeds is upbeat, fresh and not-too-serious. It is an informal space after all, where plenty of fun is to be had. Take the 80-year-old ladies who come in every Sunday for milkshakes. "It's the same ladies and they always have a table of 4-6 and just drink milkshakes. Like kids. And chat," Ernest laughs, "Once a group of young mothers saw them and said, 'Oh my god! We'll be them in forty years!'",

But then the conversation turns serious. My coffee has arrived and I am asked how it is. Anyone who has ever met a decent barista knows that coffee is no small matter. "Ernest makes great coffee," Frankie tells me. And one should hope so — he has been making coffee for ten years (a seasoned professional now) and "loves, loves coffee", I am emphatically told. He needn't have worried — the coffee was perfect.

"Something I really respect about baristas is when they run their own coffees. I tell my baristas to make their own run if they have the time. When you go to a cafe and see a barista make a coffee and serve it to the customer, and go back to the bar — that's special." Ernest tells me an experience he will never forget: "I once ordered a

single origin latte and I watched the barista as she worked. She made a shot of coffee, smelt it, looked at it, tasted it and threw it away, because it wasn't good enough. She then started from scratch. And I thought, 'I like this girl.'"

Indeed, one of the best baristas I've experienced told me "If it's not good enough for you, it's not good enough for me." If there is one thing that defines Melburnians — diverse as they are — it's that *coffee matters*.

But it's not everything. Plenty of cafes make great coffee. So what distinguishes Two Seeds? "Diversity," Frankie tells me once again, "our whole thing is to be diverse. The Two Seeds name is about growth in two directions. What I really like about this place is the diverse crowd. We have tradies, young professionals and retirees as customers."

And how does this cafe cater to that diversity? One thing that struck me was the surprisingly adventurous menu. Along with staples such as Smashed Avocado and Eggs Benedict were more esoteric options, such as Chargrilled Pork Belly with Rice and Crumbed Chicken with Orange and Salad. All this can be attributed to Chef Rasy — a woman small in stature but dynamic in presence. As a Western-trained chef with an Asian background, Chef Rasy brings an eastern twist to an otherwise standard cafe menu.

"We had Pho for a month," Frankie says, "which is no small feat. Everything was made from scratch — broth from bones." If Frankie is the mouth of the cafe, then Chef Rasy is the force in the kitchen. "We source everything locally to make sure it's fresh. It's the small things; our hash browns are made from the beginning. They're crispy on the outside, and soft on the inside." He believes that customers can taste attention to detail and appreciate the quality — which is why business is booming even on a Monday afternoon. "It's not in a factory line being churned out. There has to be love."

There's plenty of that at Two Seeds. "Food is an old world thing," he muses. Indeed, a hearty meal has always brought people together. A shared love for food certainly kept three high school friends together through a decade.

This is the story of Two Seeds. But it's not over yet. It's still growing, evolving, pushing up towards the sun. ■

