Coffee bar and bakehouse is a dream come true

Teamwork is key to success while building a good reputation, say **Tristan Aitchison** and **Fernando Basaldua Bazaldua**, proprietors of XOKO

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Q How would you describe your business to a stranger?

A Tristan: XOKO is an independent coffee bar and bakehouse in Bridge Street which we opened in July. It has a relaxed, cosmopolitan atmosphere and we create all our food from scratch, specialising in the best artisan sourdoughs, pastries, cakes, chocolates and daily event sandwiches.

Our open-plan layout means customers can watch us create their order and see the passion that goes into our food which has an international twist. We use the best ingredients – for example, our coffee is single origin from Colombia and our flour is organic from a traditional mill. We are open six days a week from 7am -5pm and the menu changes weekly.

XOKO (pronounced shaw-ko) is from a native Mexican language and thought to be the origin of the word chocolate.

Q What inspired you to start the business?

A Tristan: We met four years ago when Fernando, who is from Mexico, came to the UK to learn English. My family has worked in hospitality in this area for many years.

Fernando is a great baker and worked in patisserie in South America and Spain where his team won the 2017 award for best panettone in the country.

We started in business together pre-pandemic making bread and selling it at markets. It wasn't our intention to open a shop, but our families encouraged us to think bigger. The bakehouse and coffee bar idea with influences from around the world developed from Fernando's experiences and mine from when I lived in Asia.

Fernando: It was my dream to open a place. I don't call myself a chef, but I love to cook and have a passion to bake and create food that people want to eat in a meeting place which could be anywhere in the world.

Fernando Basaldua Bazaldu and Tristan Aitchison of XOKO.

Q How has your business developed?

A Tristan: We used lockdown to completely transform the former hairdressing salon, Toni & Guy in Bridge Street, and it took about a year from the first seeds of the business to opening. We now have a settled staff and more items on the menu – three core dishes for breakfast and three for lunch, each with variations.

We have also incorporated an exhibition space where every month we change the artists and photographers.

Fernando: We are gaining a good reputation and more regular customers – one even comes weekly from Brora to buy our sourdough. It is important that customers can see what we are doing. I feel a kitchen should not be hidden. People have more knowledge now they watch cooking shows and like to see how things are done and talk to us about it.

Q How are you moving forward post the Covid-19 pandemic?

A Tristan: We would like to expand our pastries range and offer an afternoon experience as well as open seven days a week. We want to recruit more trained staff as we can't do it all ourselves. Fernando already starts baking at 4am.

Q What lessons have you learnt from your time in business?

A Tristan: Teamwork is vital. Like other businesses, we were having difficulty finding staff. But now we have a good team and an experienced barista, and everyone helps with everything.

Q What's your vision for Inverness City Centre?

A Tristan: I think the pandemic has made people realise the importance of independent local businesses to our city centre.

They make it a unique and enjoyable place to visit by people in Inverness and surrounding areas, as well as tourists.

Q Tell us something interesting about yourself?

A Fernando: I have a degree in gastronomy.

Tristan: I am an award-winning film-maker.