

Brooklyn Tea, Brooklyn, NY



Alfonso Wright and Jamila McGill were both bit by the entrepreneurship bug when they were children. Alfonso's desire was fueled by his father, while Jamila simply knew she wanted to be an entrepreneur from the beginning.

Years later, the couple has used their entrepreneurial drive to open Brooklyn Tea, a tearoom located in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. With a location that features more than 60 hot and cold teas, Alfonso and Jamila have made it their mission to provide "free, expert-level tea education" to their customers.

"I started serving my mom tea at her bedside at the age of three. For my family, tea was woven into our Jamaican culture," says Alfonso. Jamila's love of tea flourished when she started dating Alfonso and she was inspired by the vast world of tea and tea culture.

"When you give someone a cup of tea, every time it's for their benefit so it's amazing that you have the chance to do that every single day," says Jamila.

Alfonso and Jamila take pride in the role they play in helping to develop their community's love of tea. Today, the duo has taken an interest in encouraging new tea drinkers and building their brand along the way.

We had the pleasure of working with Alfonso and Jamila on financing for their new venture, and we were thrilled to provide them with an SBA Community Advantage loan. "Alfonso's passion truly resonated at every stage of the loan process.," says Kafilatu Tiamiyu, analyst at Pursuit. "Unlike many business owners with just an idea, Alfonso and Jamila had a game plan to complement their idea."

We spoke with Alfonso about the rewards and challenges that come with being a business owner, his hopes for Brooklyn Tea in the future, and his experience working with Pursuit.

Your business has experienced significant success over the first few years. What has been the most rewarding aspect of owning your own business?

The most rewarding part is the smile we get from customers when they taste our teas or enjoy our tearoom. We are inspired by people who had some preconceived notions about tea but are transformed to avid tea drinkers from their experience with our brand.

We also feel rewarded when like-minded people meet at our tearoom for the first time and become fast friends or business partners. The betterment of the physical, social, and emotional health of the people we serve is why we do what we do!

What are some of the challenges you have faced throughout this process?

The ebbs and flows of capital are definitely the most difficult part of owning your own business. There's a special challenge in having the right balance of money and employees to manage both slow and busy times. We are constantly concerned about having too little or too much of all the individual things that make this Brooklyn Tea experience enjoyable for our customers.

How did your relationship with Pursuit begin?

While creating our business plan, we knew capital was going to be the biggest hurdle for first time entrepreneurs. We worked with SCORE to help us develop a great business plan to entice investors. They lead us to meet with the Brooklyn Borough Presidents Office. Their office fine-tuned our plan and gave us a contact in the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce.

After some more fine tuning, our contact there handed our paperwork to Pursuit. A few months later the first location of Brooklyn Tea was open and ready for business!

What are your hopes for Brooklyn Tea for the future?

We are hoping and planning to expand Brooklyn Tea in three ways. We are currently engaging in B2B sales with local cafés, restaurants, retail stores, and hotels. We hope to expand that reach nationally and eventually internationally.

Our second mode of expansion will come in the form of franchising the brand to other entrepreneurs. We are researching the legal and operational details of such a venture due to several recent inquiries.

Our largest hope is to eventually expand to bottling our drinks and retailing them nationally. This would require the most capital but also has the potential to create the most success!

What advice can you offer small business owners who are trying to grow or seeking alternative financing?

Our mantra for year 1 has been to just say yes. We've done events and festivals and said yes to small events that didn't seem like big "money-makers." The result of this mantra has been free press, corporate partners, and many long-term relationships. You never know where and when an opportunity will arise so when you are just starting out it is best to say yes whenever possible.

Also, create the best business plan you can and do as much research as possible. The business plan that we created with the help of SCORE and with the fine tuning of countless other agencies helped us to win \$10k at the Brooklyn Public Library PowerUP Competition. Financers want to know that you are serious and thorough. The hours of work you invest in planning and research will benefit you exponentially.

The Pursuit team looks forward to watching Alfonso and Jamila's continued success!

