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For Taza, a flood of support after storm *Chocolatier hopes to survive recent calamity*

By Natalie Southwick
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After five months of renovation, Somerville chocolate company Taza Chocolate had just put the finishing touches on a new manufacturing facility, with shiny equipment, never-used furniture, and a colorful office space.

Then the flood came. The torrential downpour that flooded parts of the region a week and a half ago seeped into every corner of the 9,700-square-foot space on Windsor Street, soaking cubicles and destroying most of the machinery used to produce the dark chocolate bars, disks, and baking ingredients that Taza sells to restaurants, at farmers' markets, and in stores across the country.



Without the ability to manufacture chocolate, the small company, which did not have flood insurance, faces the most serious challenge in its three years of existence. The owners are trying to rebuild but lack the money to do it alone. Fortunately, their customers and vendors are stepping up to help them out.

When Taza's manufacturing director, Mike Schechter, stopped by to check on the facility around 3 p.m. on July 10, he found 4 inches of still-rising water. He immediately began calling every employee whose number he had, asking them to come in and help.

Two hours later, seven of Taza's 20 employees, two of their boyfriends, and cofounder Larry Slotnick's 2-year-old son were hauling buckets through the space, which had lost power when a lightning bolt struck the building's transformer.

"The toilets still took water, so we were trying to bail water into the toilets in the dark," said Taza sales manager Sara Ossi. "It was pitch-black, and I had my headlamp and was wandering around in flip-flops in the water. It was like spelunking in here."

A cleaning crew arrived Sunday, but the damage was done. Workers removed the bottom 16 inches of drywall from every room, and everything except the mysteriously still-functioning copy machine had to be thrown away.

"It reminded me of when I was gutting houses after Katrina," Ossi said. "It wasn't nearly as much as that, but still it's amazing how destructive water can be."

The financial impact didn't sink in until later.

“We just went through the process of finding the money, getting the loans to build our new space, and then this happens right at a point in time where we have absolutely no money,” said cofounder Alex Whitmore. “It’s pretty devastating to us.”

Because the damage was caused by groundwater flooding, it is not covered by insurance, according to Whitmore, who estimated the cost of repairs will be “in the high tens of thousands of dollars.” In the meantime, the company can’t produce its signature organic dark chocolate for at least a week and a half.

“It basically caused us to have to completely shut down manufacturing,” Whitmore said. “If we can’t make chocolate, we’re going to run out of money.”

But they aren’t ready to let their business fail. On Wednesday, they e-mailed their customers, asking them to buy the chocolate that survived in the second-floor storage space — and received a barrage of orders. Taza’s Twitter page was filled with promises to order extra bars or eat chocolate for all three meals. One follower had chocolate delivered to his office by bike messenger.

“The social media response has been huge,” Whitmore said. “People are being really wonderful and really helping spread the word.”

Loyal fans have come out in person too. Taza employee Amanda Mallen, 23, who sells the products at local farmers’ markets, said she’s seen a huge response.

“A lot of people said they’d seen the e-mail and wanted to help out,” Mallen said. “People were coming up and buying five bars. It was like twice as much as we usually sell.”

Chocoholics aren’t the only ones pitching in. Several of Taza’s longtime vendors are staging special promotions in coming weeks to encourage customers to buy the chocolate.

Henrietta’s Table, a restaurant at the Charles Hotel in Harvard Square that uses locally produced food, offered to donate 10 percent of all sales of its Taza chocolate pecan mud pie dessert to Taza through the end of August.

“We like to support each other and support the community,” said executive chef Peter Davis. “We think it’s a good local product, and we don’t want to see them go away.”

Porter Square health store Cambridge Naturals promised to give a 20 percent discount on Taza chocolate this weekend. General manager Kris Berg said she has already received several e-mails from customers who were touched by their support and promised to stop by.

Staff at Panzano, an Italian market and wine shop in Southborough, felt obligated to help, according to general manager and wine director Fred Mullins. “Larry and Alex are really important to us,” Mullins said. “We believe in what they do and wanted to help them out.”

Panzano placed an order for about 1,000 items — triple the usual size. It plans to offer special promotions for the extra chocolate during its weekly wine tasting next weekend, including free tote bags for customers who purchase more than \$50 worth of chocolate or wine. Mullins said the staff would wear Taza T-shirts, “as an act of solidarity.”

“The whole idea is to raise awareness of what happened and make people understand it’s important to protect our own,” Mullins said. “Call it Taza Solidarity Weekend.”