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Micro Roaster of the Year

COFFEE KLATCH

by Rivers Janssen

COFFEE ROASTING may not be rocket science, but it unquestionably borrows from scientific principles. Perhaps that's one reason that Mike Perry—a biochemical engineering grad from the University of California at Riverside—took so comfortably to the craft.

“When we started, we did it for the love of the cup,” says Perry. “But at that time there weren't really the roasting books, the classes, and the schools that there are today... So I started applying what I learned in engineering and plotted everything I wanted to do. I cupped every single batch, I documented every single detail, and I taught myself what worked and what didn't. It was really a scientific approach, but it was all verified in the cup.”

His attention to detail has clearly paid off, as Coffee Klatch—which Perry started in 1993 with a single retail store in Rancho Cucamonga, Cali.—is the winner of *Roast* magazine's Micro Roaster of the Year award. The company now spreads its award-winning coffee among two retail locations, plus a roastery and training center in San Dimas, and a host of wholesale clients. In addition, Coffee Klatch's roasted coffees are held in high esteem within the industry, with 80 percent of the selections earning a score of 90 or above from Kenneth Davids' Coffee Review website. And if that weren't enough, Coffee Klatch is also home to two-time U.S. Barista Champion Heather Perry, who now serves as the company's director of training and consulting. Not bad for a small operation that employs only six people in its roasting division, including Perry himself.



A Place for Conversation

Perry and his wife Cindy opened the first Coffee Klatch hoping to capture the European ideal of, well, the coffee klatch, a German term that refers to a social gathering for coffee and conversation. Their long-term path wasn't necessarily set in stone, however, as Perry was still in school studying engineering, and upon graduating had to decide between the comfort of the coffee culture and the higher salary (and stress levels) of a bioengineering career. In the end, the coffee business won out rather handily. “We loved the atmosphere, the ambiance, the ability to relax with friends and have a great time and drink coffee,” Perry explains. “We just thought the coffee business was a lot of fun.”

The couple opened their second store in San Dimas three years after the first, this time installing a Diedrich roaster in the corner. They made the decision to roast somewhat out of necessity, as good roasted coffee was hard to come by in the area. “We were getting coffee beans from all over, an espresso from one roaster, a few varietal coffees from another,” Perry says. “I think at one point we were buying coffee from six different roasters.”

Learning to roast is one thing, and Perry had the advantage of his engineering background and the technical training of such industry stalwarts as Stephan Diedrich. But, learning how to source great raw coffee is another. It's especially challenging for a company the size of Coffee

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Klatch, which roasted roughly 95,000 pounds of coffee in 2008 and doesn't have the capacity to hire a full-time green buyer who can travel to origin on a whim.

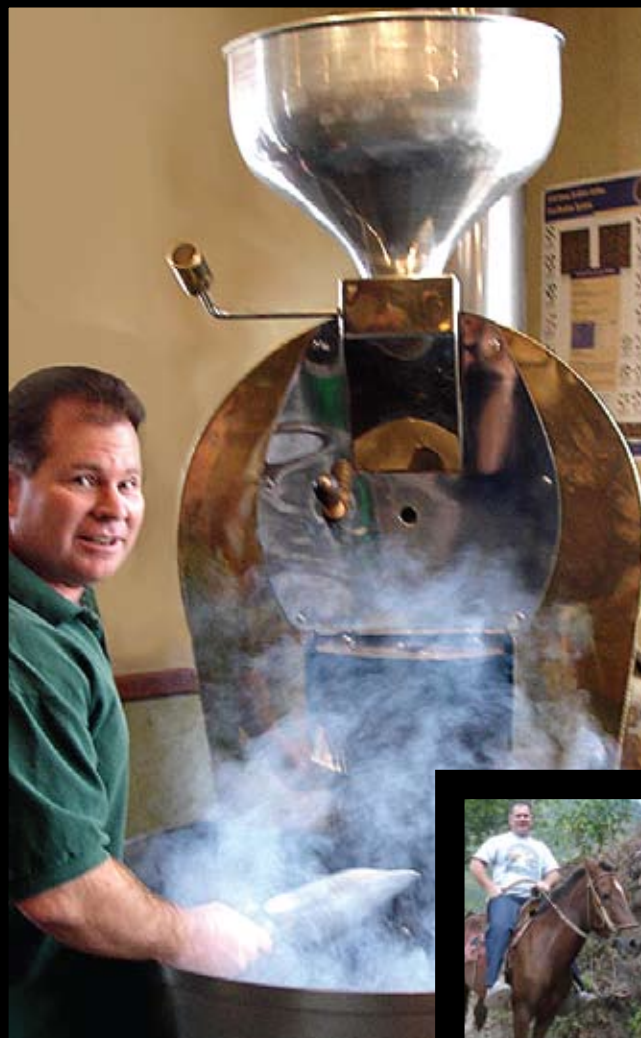
"As a small company, I personally do all the green buying," says Perry, who says he makes it down to origin around three times each year, albeit usually to several countries per trip. "That has its drawbacks, though, as I can't do any other sampling while on the road. I'm one of only two people in the company that roasts, I establish all the roast profiles, I do a lot of cupping, and I have to make sure the bills are being paid. We're still a family business, so it's a challenge."

In many ways, however, that makes Coffee Klatch's accomplishments all the more impressive. Despite not being able to travel to origin as much as he'd like, Perry has forged a reputation for purchasing some of the world's most outstanding coffees at the farm level, helping him meet Coffee Klatch's goal of creating direct, trusting relationships with coffee farmers rather than brokers. Among the coffees available at Coffee Klatch are Panama's Hacienda La Esmeralda, a favorite of specialty roasters due to its rare Geisha varietal and the striking flavors it produces; Nicaragua's JavaNic, which hails from sister farms Finca Gloria and Finca Limoncillo and also stems from an unusual varietal, in this case the new-to-the-region Ethiopian Longberry; and El Salvador's Finca Las Mercedes, a fourth-generation coffee that produces a fruity, lively, impeccably processed cup.

Perry has also come to rely on the collegial atmosphere of the specialty coffee industry to help overcome a few of Coffee Klatch's size limitations. He's good friends with Jeff Taylor, the co-owner of PT's Coffee Roasting (*Roast's* Macro Roaster of the Year) and a frequent travel partner. The two have split small lots of expensive coffees on more than one occasion, which gives Perry access to excellent coffee without having to commit to an entire lot by himself. He and Taylor are also part of a growing number of specialty roasters who support the direct-trade sourcing model. Pioneered within the last few years by roasters such as Intelligentsia, Counter Culture Coffee, and Stumptown, the direct-trade model assumes that high-quality coffee, sustainable farming methods, and personal relationships with farmers go hand and hand. Most of these roasters are enthusiastic about sharing information, helping roasters like Perry create their own direct-trade programs without starting from scratch.

"Even though coffee is a huge industry—you hear all the statistics, like coffee is second behind oil as a commodity—from the standpoint of specialty it's somewhat small," says Perry. "You see the same people at different events and places. The great thing is that we share the same priorities: helping

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THE WINNER'S STATS

Owner Mike Perry

Established 1993

Location San Dimas, Calif.

Employees 4 employees in roasting department, green buyer, and director of training

Retail locations 2 plus a roastery/training center

Roasters (machines)

Diedrich IR-24

Pounds per Year 95,000 (2008)

Certifications Organic, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance

Website www.klatchroasting.com

farmers improve their coffee and bringing something great to the customers. So most of the successful guys are willing to share what they know.”

All of Coffee Klatch’s direct-trade coffees share a few basic criteria: the coffee must be exceptional, the roaster must visit the farm or co-op at least once per harvest season; the farmer must employ environmentally and socially sustainable farming practices; the roaster must pay prices for the coffee that exceed the C Market and/or fair-trade price by at least 25 percent; and all direct-trade participants must agree to transparency throughout the transactional process.

The advantage of direct trade for roasters is that it helps identify the artisan farmers who are committed to producing exceptional coffee—a relationship that often pays off well into the future, as the farmer learns exactly what qualities the roaster values in a coffee. The farmer, however, also receives other benefits much of the time. Coffee Klatch’s contract with Finca Las Mercedes, for instance, includes a clause that requires the farm to reinvest 10 percent of the price of the coffee into an agreed-



upon community project. This year, Coffee Klatch is partnering with PT’s Coffee and Finca Las Mercedes to sponsor a local soccer team, with the leftover money going to fund a medical clinic. “It’s particularly important because farms like Las Mercedes can’t qualify for Fair Trade, as they’re not part of a democratically elected co-op,” explains Perry. “But Las Mercedes takes their commitment seriously as a major employer in the area. So by paying them a premium well above the fair-trade price, we can really

help them give back to the community.”

Perry estimates that roughly 33 percent of his coffee currently comes from direct-trade relationships, but he expects that number to increase significantly in the coming years. “It would be great if we could be 100 percent direct trade, but as a smaller guy, that’ll take a lot of time,” he says. “We may never get there, because we have to visit the farm each year as part of the contract, and it’s unrealistic to say I’ll get to Africa and Indonesia each year.” Perry adds, however, that Coffee Klatch still tries to research the farms they buy from to make sure they’re following the basic principles of direct trade.

Preparing It Correctly

No discussion of Coffee Klatch coffee is complete without a glimpse at the company’s espresso blends, which have received a number of honors, including an award for “best espresso in the world” at the World Barista Championships (WBC)—with more than 45 countries competing—and an impressive 94 rating from Coffee Review. “We spend more time on espresso than anything else,” says Perry. “That’s where competitions have benefited us, as the professionalism surrounding each barista contest encourages us to keep working on our blends. We’re always evaluating every

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detail, starting with each bean as a single origin and then running it several times to look at the color, the crema, the persistence, and so on.”

The WBC championship blend features a Brazil yellow bourbon, a Sumatra Lake Tawar, and an Ethiopian natural, each roasted separately and then blended together. As the Coffee Klatch website describes it, “When run at 25 to 28 seconds, your first taste is chocolate and citrus, with orange as the prominent citrus flavor, while your second and final sip will turn syrupy sweet with wine-like berry and spice.” The company also offers a 2008 U.S. competition blend, the highly rated Belle Espresso blend, and an organic espresso blend.

In charge of making sure the espressos taste perfect is Heather Perry, Mike’s daughter and a two-time U.S. barista champion. Heather teaches both Coffee Klatch’s baristas and wholesale customers how to grind, dose, tamp and extract great espresso at the company’s training lab, which features equipment from La Marzocco, Nuova Simonelli, Fetco, Mazzar and others. The in-house program is designed on a graduating scale: level one trainees have to learn a basic set of skills while passing a couple of written tests (including earning a 75 percent score on an exam covering the *Espresso 101* video); level six trainees, by contrast, must be able to make three specified drinks in less than two minutes 50 seconds,

must be able to create or duplicate a signature latte art design, and must compete in a barista competition. The higher the level, the better the pay. And as with any good roaster, cupping is also on the training menu, with customers having the opportunity to experience different regions, varieties, and roasts.

The heart of Coffee Klatch, however, is Perry’s enthusiasm for the business. The coffee quality wouldn’t be nearly as good nor the training nearly as thorough were it not for Perry’s dedication to the cup. It’s a far cry from a career in biochemical engineering. “I feel very fortunate that I don’t have to go to work, I get to go to work,” Perry says. “I mean that from the heart. You really don’t get rich in this business, but the richness comes from the satisfaction of making a difference for the farmer and tasting the coffee.”



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