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The Flamekeeper

Newsletter of the Roasters Guild
Spring 2003

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Norway and Coffee By: Trish R Skeie

November, 2002: The final night of Oslo's preliminary rounds for the Norwegian Barista Championships. The last competitor steps up to the bar to begin his 10 minutes of prep time. He looks nothing like the others. No trendy hairdo, no expensive jeans or silver-studded eyebrow. As a matter of fact, he is not a working barista at all. Looking more like a shorter, jollier Pappa Hemingway, he is Alf Kramer (among other things: the former chairman and founder of The SCAEurope, past director of The Norwegian Coffee Association, a champion of coffee causes worldwide, and Norway's father of coffee's Second Wave). He is competing tonight against kids 30 years his junior. Some weren't even born when he began working in Specialty Coffee, and many don't even really know who he is. So why is he here? Could be he knows the Third Wave of coffee is swelling in Norway and he's here to surf some crema.

First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave: this is how I think of contemporary coffee. There seem to be three movements influencing what Erna Knutsen, a Norwegian immigrant to America, termed Specialty Coffee. Each approach has its own set of priorities and philosophies; each has contributed to the consumer's experience—and our livelihoods. Occasionally, the waves overlap; and one inevitably spills over to influence the next. What have we chosen to accept as conventional coffee wisdom? What have we rejected? What does the next wave have to offer?

At first glance, it looks like there is plenty to reject from the First Wave of coffee. We like to point at them and say: look who made bad coffee commonplace, look who created low quality instant solubles, look who blended away all the nuance, look who forced prices to an all time low! They were and are the mass-marketers. While coffee has steadily grown in popularity since it's discovery, the First Wavers made it their mission to increase consumption exponentially.

There is a First Waver who occasionally visits my micro-roastery/espresso bar. It is always educational and entertaining for the staff when he comes. He tells me to quench my roasts with 15% water, and pantomimes cash going into pockets. He tells us to count the paper bag as the weight of product at the bean counter. He even tells us we can use half the ingredients and charge more for our sandwiches. Two or three times a visit he tells us how long he was in the business before he retired (35 years), and then proceeds to shake his head and chuckle at our featured 'single origin' of the day.

The First Wave has its pros and cons. On the plus side, they revolutionized the packaging and marketing of coffee. Air-tight cans, pre-ground portion packs, and Juan Valdez were their ideas. We borrow a lot from the First Wave, even if we don't like to acknowledge it.

Like me, you are probably a Second Waver. Whether we began our careers in the late 60's or mid-1990's, we tend to have a common philosophy. Our entrance was artisan driven. Someone turned us on to coffee origins and roasting styles. We looked to the wine industry for inspiration in defining goals and strategies. We started destination shops with small roasting operations and fine tea selections. Pretty soon we were serving espresso and taking trips to Italy and producing countries. There are lots of good things to say about the Second Wave; and, yes, a



few bad things too.

Starbucks is an example of a hyper-Second Wave company. They helped introduce the words 'latte', 'French Roast', and 'cappuccino' into consumers' vocabularies—not to mention their daily lives. They have become so specialized within the world of Specialty Coffee that they have even created their own language, (a tall, grande latte may mean nothing at your shop, yet people always order it). Making no secret of their goal of '2000 outlets by the year 2000', they have exceeded their objective by far and have set the pace for the Second Wave. Every coffee company wonders a little about how they can compete against the Second Wave giants, and as a result we are beginning to shift and rethink. For every outlet that opens with a semi-automatic espresso system, there is a Third Waver, working overtime, staining her hands brown with coffee as she handcrafts the perfect shot. The Third Wave is a reaction to those who want to automate and homogenize Specialty Coffee.

AWAKENING CURIOSITY

"We wouldn't be what we are if it weren't for the automatics," says Tim Wendelboe, Norway's reigning Barista Champion for two years running. "We know what that (automatic) coffee tastes like, and we want to get away from it." I know he is talking about more than just espresso machines. And when he says we, he is referring to dozens of Oslo baristas that work every year to better each other and themselves in the regional barista competition.

Robert Thoresen, winner of the first World Barista Championship (Monte Carlo 2000) and Wendelboe's former competition rival, takes it one step further. He wonders, as the three of us sit down to chat, why we are even talking about automatic machines. I call their attention to the "Year-End Pontifications" December 2002, by Tea and Coffee Trade Journal's editor Jane McCabe. One of the four topics she chooses to highlight is barista training; saying it is a good thing, but that, "...all baristas should be aware of the advantages superautomatic espresso machines offer a coffee bar owner." Be aware or beware?

Thoresen owns two coffee bars in Oslo and Wendelboe manages two others. Considering automatic espresso did not get them where they are today. All of Thoresen's baristi are required to complete six weeks' intensive training before they can work the bar. Wendelboe's regimen is similar. Their goal is to pull the best espresso possible, not necessarily the most. They take their time, they do it right, and it has paid off. Their shops' shelves are lined with barista trophies, gourmet magazines feature their articles, and award winning restaurants ask their advice. Regular customers have no problem standing in line because they know it's worth the wait. They have no desire to automate, despite reports of other European cities falling prey to large American chains.

It is ironic that Norway, a country that feels little pressure from Second Wave giants, would be experiencing such a strong Third Wave in coffee—or maybe this is precisely why. The entire population of Norway is somewhere around 4.5 million, and they love to travel. It is one of those countries where, at any given moment, more of its citizens are out traveling than living within its borders. Because of this world view—and the strong coffee traditions in Scandinavia—jet-set urbanites developed a love for espresso bars. The Second Wave made its mark in the 90's with small coffee bar chains in Norway's capital city. Competition for those few customers fueled the desire to be true to the craft of the barista. Specialty Coffee in Norway is now heavily influenced by the barista.

"The barista stands between the roaster and the consumer", says Thoresen. "In that role, I can express my own preferences." He sees the coffee experience like a pyramid with history at the base, then tradition, trends, and preferences built on top. The idea of expressing personal preferences may be seen by some as overly ambitious for a barista. The Third Wave challenges this and other commonly held notions of coffee's hierarchy. For example, it's no problem for us to recognize the roast master as an artisan, and we know the affect a good barista can have on the product, but how often do these disciplines converge?

In 2001, Thoresen opened the first in-shop roastery of its kind in Oslo. Doing this, he insists, was just a way to better control the product at the bar and showcase a point of view. He claims that putting forth his ideas about coffee is another means to educate the public. "In Norwegian we say, folke opplysning, educating the people; we have a duty to do that in this business. We also have a responsibility to make it clear that this is our opinion. Our opinion is not the standard, and there is no standard. We never want to be seen as arrogant."

The word arrogant comes up many times throughout our conversation. I get the feeling this is their opinion of some of the Second Wavers they have encountered. It seems like everything they have been taught is up for inspection. Despite being new in the business (barely a decade of experience combined), they no longer take their predecessors' words as gospel. "I am convinced some of these people are the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time. They will peel and eat an orange and then walk right into the cupping room," says Wendelboe.

Still, both of these master baristi believe in having a good understanding of history and tradition before claiming preferences. I have personally witnessed just the opposite with a lot of Second Wavers. Opinions are being bandied about as fact. One roaster told me that he would never consider using Ethiopian in an espresso blend despite the wide array available to him. I asked why. He answered that his mentor had told him so. Another well respected source claims a good espresso's crema should last 40 minutes and the aftertaste for two hours. Where those numbers came from, I can't say. Some of us create new rules from observing our own coffee: crema shall be an even shade of red-brown and hold sugar for so many seconds; if you're roasting to that Agtron number, then it's an Italian Roast; it's not espresso unless it features a Brazil; selling whole beans from a bin means quality. That brought me to my next question. Which rules about coffee do these guys accept, and which do they reject? The response became an exercise in avoiding absolutes—another characteristic of the Third Wave.

Wendelboe, taking an entire month off from his regular duties to blend and roast samples for a new espresso, jumps right in: "Arabica is always going to be better!"

Thoresen: "Wait, that discussion is not over. We shouldn't rule out the new Robustas. I mean, I don't choose them right now, but let's not throw them out."

Wendelboe: "I agree. Some of them are actually really good."

Me: "As good as Arabica?"

Wendelboe: "Oh sure."

He is not contradicting himself, just working on his opinion. A Third Waver's opinion is a constant work in progress. He goes on to say that the Barista Championships were designed to educate baristas on proper craftsmanship and awaken curiosity, but the craft is continually evolving.

"We have always known about correct technique," he says, "but now we are more correct than before." Now they know enough to disregard such rules as a standard extraction time. There are as many extraction truths as there are espressos. The variables are endless with coffee, and this is what they are teaching their staff and customers.

"I have made three big changes in the espresso since I opened my first shop five years ago—major things, that change the drinks," says Thoresen. "First we asked the customer to drink ristretto; that's how we make the shot because that's how we like it. Then we changed to triple filters, because the espresso we were using had a dark profile. Then we switched to our own coffee from the new roastery and had to go back to the double filters. Big changes, but the customers just had to trust me."

WAVE OR NO WAVE

Norwegians are trusted with new ideas all the time. Apparently targeting Oslo as the perfect guinea pig, Nestle has popped up a few blocks away with their European pilot coffee shop. The concept is based entirely on drinks made from automatic machines and instant soluble espresso. Maybe this Third Wave is not a wave at all. Time will tell if it can survive the push from the bigger, faster, super companies with their formula drinks and, we will have to wait and see if this wave will take hold like the previous two have.

Wendelboe believes it can only go forward—at least in Norway. Again, he makes the case for a "no rules" approach to coffee, and maintains it is the only way to learn and present anything new. Thoresen thinks the Third Wave could be showing itself in Italy. He saw a shop in Trieste that was pulling shots of single origins as well a myriad of espresso blends. The roast profiles ran the gamut. It was an experience, he says, which helped him see unlimited avenues - and that was Northern Italy, a place many Second Wavers would like to believe plays by the espresso rules. In typical Italian fashion, they hold the traditions close as they use their taste buds to shift the paradigm.

There is no denying, however, that Norway and the Third Wave have set a new standard for baristi worldwide. As of this writing, a 2003 Norwegian champion has not been chosen, (despite

all his knowledge and prowess, Alf Kramer did not advance to the quarter-finals). The word on the street predicts it will be a barista from Thoresen's shop and one from Wendelboe's going head to head in the final. They have spent the past few months perfecting and downsizing their signature drinks into exquisite, jewel-like espresso concoctions. In both cases, the coffee will make the moment, not the whipped cream or flavored syrup. These baristi will be able to tell you exactly when their coffee was roasted, how the beans were processed, the idea behind the blend, and offer cupping notes. And beware; their technique will be more flawless than the year before.



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