



For the love of java

The Hudson Valley is home to several artisanal coffee roasters

BY ABBY LUBY

If you ask a Westchester artisanal coffee roaster how to make the perfect cup of coffee, they will tell you, without skipping a beat, start with whole beans, grind them up with a burr, not a metal grinder, use hot filtered water to burst the flavor, brew, savor the steamy rich elixir, sip by sip.

Artisanal micro roasters are passionate about the multi-tiered process it takes to get that perfect cup of coffee, from the hand-picked cherry seeds off the coffee tree to peeling away the fruit's skin and pulp for the pale flat seeds which are roasted to perfection and become a prized coffee bean. We've come a long way from a five-cent flat cup of coffee of the 1950s to today's seminal Starbucks' coffee culture.

Large-scale coffee production, however, gave rise to "third-wave" coffee roasters, purists seeking that perfect

bean for a less bitter and more nuanced cup of coffee. As one of the first third-wavers in New York City and in Westchester, Coffee Labs owners Mike and Alicia Love came to Tarrytown in 2003 and opened their doors on Main Street next to the Tarrytown Music Hall. Their popular café is where they roast the beans and serve pastries along with frozen lattes or mochas.

"We were interested in high quality coffee," said Alicia Love. "We wanted to bring coffee to another level. Coffee is a craft and we try to roast the beans to get an exact flavor."

The majority of regions growing coffee are 20 degrees north and south of the equator. Known as the "bean belt," it includes the Americas, Africa and Southeast Asia. Love said over the years they have developed many personal relationships with coffee farmers around the world.

"We've built relationships with farmers and have visited them on their farms in countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and really got to know them," said Love. "These farmers have also visited Coffee Labs to see the business and tell our customers how their coffee is grown. We have contracts with individual farmers that commit us to stay with them even if their crop is less some years than others."

For most coffee roasters, Arabica beans are preferred to the lesser grade Robusta beans, which have more caffeine, are generally used to make espresso and used by major commercial coffees. Arabica beans are what professional roasters use, like Elina Dart, founder of Big Bang Coffee Roasters in Peekskill. Dart keeps her inventories small and the ongoing turnover of "green" beans guarantees freshness.

"All the coffee beans are seasonal and when certain beans are not available, I switch to a new coffee," said Dart. "Bags are 132 to 152 pounds and I buy one bag at a time so it's super fresh."

Big Bang Coffee sells a variety of beans and blends retail and wholesale and ships coffee the day it's roasted. Dart, active in the world of coffee for the last 20 years, has operated out of the Hat Factory in Peekskill since 2015. She orders Arabica beans from farms in Ethiopia, Sumatra, Guatemala, the Congo, to name a few. The beans are from reputable organic growers that are certified sustainable and

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Jonathan Baratz, owner and coffee roaster at Bear Mountain Coffee Roasters in Mahopac.

PHOTOS: ABBY LUBY



The Coffee Labs Roaster in action at Coffee Labs in Tarrytown.

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Elina Dart, owner of Big Bang Coffee Roasters in Peekskill, roasting a fresh batch of coffee beans.

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organic by organizations such as Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance and UTZ.

“Those programs help the growers, protects their workers and ensure that a piece of the profits goes to building communities, schools, bridges and to improve the quality of life for everyone who touches the coffee,” Dart explained.

The magic is in the roasting. Transforming the green beans using different types of heat in varying degrees for a certain amount of time ultimately creates a myriad of coffee tastes and fragrances. Roasters could be run by gas, electric or infrared, use either a drum bed or fluid bed, stainless steel or cast iron, automatic or manually controlled.

“I have one fluid air bed roaster to do a super small batch,” said Dart. “Depending on the weight of the bean, I generally roast for 12 to 18 minutes.”

For Zoe Grant, owner and manager of The Black Cow in Croton-On-Hudson, and in Pleasantville, roasting is a complicated science. “The time for roasting varies and is based on the character of the bean and whether it has a higher moisture content or if it’s a denser bean,” she said. “For instance, French Roast takes longer at a certain temperature.”

Originally opened by Grant’s parents, the Black Cow just celebrated its 25th year of opening their Croton-On-Hudson café, which is where the roasting takes place and where they sell coffee beans, serve coffee and food. They opened a coffee shop in Pleasantville in 2012 and more

recently a lobby café in Phelps Hospital in Sleepy Hollow.

Grant said she’s noticed that over the years, coffee trends have changed as the subtleties of specialty, small batch beans became apparent on one’s palate. Tasting coffee can be compared to discerning the complex scents in a wine’s bouquet or the bitter and floral flavors in hops of craft beers. “There’s definitely more interest in the specificity of coffee,” said Grant. “Right now, people are looking for more African coffee, which tends to have higher acidity, a more punch, vibrant flavor. My dream is to have ‘coffee cupping’ once the pandemic is over.”

Grant envisions coffee tastings as a chance to learn and experience the many flavors in a cup of black coffee. “If you take a moment, swish it in your mouth to hit all the different surfaces of your tongue, you will taste many flavors,” she explained. “For instance, Ethiopian coffee has a tangy acidity, hints of raspberry and a piney taste.”

Other subtleties emerging from Central and South American darker coffees are fruity flavors with hints of rich dark chocolate while Asian-grown beans yield earthy and chocolate flavors.

That more coffee drinkers are staying home because of the pandemic and ordering coffee beans online means many small batch coffee roasters are seeing a tremendous boost in sales by individual consumers and specialty markets. Coffee varieties people are ordering reveal new trends.

“We’ve always sold out of the infused cold brew at farmers’ markets,” said Jonathan Baratz, owner and roaster of Bear Mountain Coffee Roasters in Mahopac. Baratz prepares single cups of the popular cold brew

coffee for customers at the markets, which is infused with nitrogen, has a subtle sweet flavor and a froth on top. Next year he plans on selling a bottled version of cold brew.

Baratz has been in the business for 16 years and has operated out of a Mahopac warehouse for ten years, where he sells wholesale to grocery and gourmet stores and retails to individual consumers.

“The new trends wouldn’t happen for companies like mine if it wasn’t for Starbucks, who put different origins on the map like Kenya and South America,” Baratz said. “It was more than the regular Maxwell House coffee found in the supermarkets for years, it was expanding small batch roasting for artisanal roasters.”

Baratz gets beans through importers, single plantations and smaller farm coops. “We are certified organic and certified fair trade. We feel it’s necessary for sure.”

Most artisanal coffee roasters seem to develop a sixth sense about a different variety of bean. Baratz said when a roaster has small amounts of coffee beans brought in from all over the world, she/he has to get to know each bean’s character. “It can’t be taught. The roaster needs to know the profile of each bean and its ‘destination’ on the palate. Then you have to figure out how to get it there. It’s not just turning the bean brown. It’s an art and takes a lot of time to get to know your coffee and bring out its best profile.”

Elina Dart calls it her coffee sweet spot. “Some beans have amazing character and if you roast it too long, you can’t identify it. For each bean, I try to find that place where it tastes just right.”