

Fine roast: Turning locals into coffee connoisseurs

by Adriane Tillman, La Jolla Village News
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Bird Rock Coffee Roasters along La Jolla Boulevard has become a source of pride in the community as Bird Rock's poster child for a local, successful business. It has also become a social hub for neighbors.

Owner Chuck Patton has carved a niche in the market across the street from Starbucks Coffee. Patton describes the success of his business as an "organic" process that evolved step-by-step into its popularity today.

"I didn't get the idea to be in the business and then build a café the next day," Patton said.

Patton, who lives a few blocks from the store, taught English at Grossmont College and City College and knew nothing about the coffee business. He began roasting coffee as a hobby at home. Eight years ago, he turned his hobby into a business when he began roasting coffee commercially out of the VFW kitchen on Turquoise Street to sell at the La Jolla farmer's market.

Patton eventually purchased his first retail space — a kiosk behind Albertson's on Turquoise Street — to sell cups of coffee.

"At each step, I was better defining the brand and learning more about the cost of the operation," Patton said. "I got excited about the possibilities. I realized that no one is doing this here. No one is doing a good enough job exposing people to good varieties."

Patton is now trailblazing his own business model for sourcing exceptional coffee by establishing direct relationships with individual farmers and rewarding them for the quality of their bean.

For the past two years, Patton has traveled to places like Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Columbia, Sumatra and Ecuador to build partnerships with individual farmers based on the quality of their beans. He tastes the coffee before he purchases anything. Originally, Patton opted to work within the Fair Trade system — which ensures farmers are paid at least a set minimum price per pound — but he is now more interested in working directly with individual farmers to help them grow better beans.

"The problem with Fair Trade is that the farmer [in the cooperative] is not rewarded for quality," Patton said.

Plus, a portion of the Fair Trade cost goes to the \$1,000 annual certification. Patton said he'd rather invest that money directly into the farm. Patton is experimenting with rewarding farmers with more pay according to the score their coffee receives in the shop.

Patton said he pays as much as \$4 per pound of coffee when commercial importers typically pay \$1.50 for a lower grade of coffee.

"It's easier to call a broker," Patton said. "That's why I'm one of the only ones doing direct trade. It's more expensive ... It requires an investment of travel.

Direct trade with individual farmers accounts for 30 percent of the coffee sold at Bird Rock Coffee Roasters, but Patton aims to push it to 75 percent by next year.

San Diego doesn't have the coffee culture like San Francisco or Seattle where people spend rainy days socializing in coffee shops and have grown to appreciate good coffee. Patton said he has the burden of making coffee connoisseurs out of San Diegans. So far, the locals are buying into it.

"People seem more educated about wine than coffee," Patton said. "Coffee is just something they drink to get a buzz before going to work. They don't think about it as having complexity and a flavor profile that's different between countries.

"When I taste coffee, I look for something that's unique and interesting, the same as you would for wine," Patton said. "Does it have body, acidity and finish? Is it clean and sweet with a pleasant acidity? In coffee from Sumatra, I look for a bigger body than in coffee from Costa Rica. In Ethiopian coffee, I look for blueberry notes. I understand the possibilities."

At home in La Jolla, Patton has also made his shop a pillar of the local community; it doesn't hurt to build favor with local customers. The store supports fundraisers at Bird Rock Elementary School. Patton donated space in the store for the Bird Rock Museum. He's promoted local artists and is working with the non-profit ArtReach to bring art to classrooms.

Patton didn't intentionally design the coffee shop to help neighbors socialize, but it's morphed into an open, relaxed space for strangers to easily chat in passing. Garage doors roll open and a bench straddles the inside and outside of the store, creating a seamless transition between the tables inside and the benches on the sidewalk. The sea breeze wafts in and sunshine is visible to customers hunched over their computers.

"I was trying to bring the ocean in ... I'm probably the coffee roaster closest to the ocean in the country," Patton said.

Bird Rock Coffee Roasters offers coffee tastings — called "cupping" — for people to learn about the art and science of coffee every Friday at 10:30 a.m. at the store, 5627 La Jolla Blvd. For more information call (858) 551-1707.

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