

# Coffee, Community, and the Front Page of this Chronicle

by Mike Ferguson



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I once attended an SCAA cupping training at The New York Board of Trade (NYBOT), which, before September 11th, 2001, was located in Building Four at the World Trade Center. The sample room was, as you would expect, full of green coffee, some in 60-kilo bags and most in smaller bags and boxes stacked everywhere. I remember being interested in the sample trays, a good portion of which were the typical cardboard variety embossed with the names of companies iconic to coffee importing. These cardboard trays intrigued me because many were at least 30 years old. More intriguing was a 1922 copy of William Ukers, *All About Coffee*, which I found among a small stack of books sitting on an utility shelf in the back of the room. The shelf faced a large window with a view of what I believe was the corner of Church and Liberty. First editions of the 1922 version, in good condition, sell for an average of \$1,000, and yet this copy received no special treatment. It was placed randomly on the shelf with all the other coffee books. I remember feeling very distinctly that in the context of that room, what I interpreted as a small triumph of function over sentimentality seemed not only appropriate, but oddly comforting.



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One of the grinders, originally intended for and perhaps used in a retail setting, had "Old Fashion Ground Coffee" printed on the side in western-style signboard lettering popular in the 1970's. Not far from the grinders sat a row of Jabez-Burns sample roasting drums and in the corner a stove topped with giant tea kettles. The contents of this room could have been guessed correctly site unseen by anyone in the coffee industry because the act of cupping, if not the primary purpose, is fundamentally the same throughout the world.

It is not my intention to eulogize the sample room at the New York Board of Trade, nor necessarily celebrate how relatively few lives within the coffee industry were lost, though we are certainly grateful for any life not taken that day. I'm after here a sense of the commonalities throughout the coffee industry, the shared experiences. The cupping table may be the most emblematic of these in that a cupping room once located squarely in the heart of the commercial coffee industry would be so similar in its accoutrements to a cupping room found at a specialty roaster with the highest quality standards.

No doubt, beyond our common humanity, it was the commonalities within the coffee industry as a whole that caused our thoughts to turn to members of the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange as the events of September 11th unfolded. The fact that they deal, generally speaking, in a different kind of coffee became irrelevant. They were coffee people, members of *our* community, and we wanted to know if *our* people were safe. SCAA received numerous calls from specialty coffee professionals asking us if the people at NYBOT and the staff of the National Coffee Association, whose offices are not far from the World Trade Center complex, were safe.

The world-wide coffee "community" is as diverse a segment of global society as you'll ever find. It may be argued that this diversity, reflected in an inability to agree on any one course of united action on almost any one issue, is a critical weakness and key contributor to the current price crisis. Competing interests exist not only up and down the coffee supply chain but within each link—a vast understatement. And yet, when SCAA requested commitments of coffee from members for the workers clearing the World Trade site, I began receiving emails from coffee producers asking how they could help. *Reforma* in Mexico City published our request for coffee. In a sub-fifty-cent market, producers wanted to know how they could give.

The idea that I'm sneaking up on here is the balancing act inherent in any functioning community. Even the hard-bitten market Darwinists who would like to take the "commune" out of "community," those who still refer to the current price slide as a "correction," must admit to the profound level of interdependence within the coffee industry when we move beyond commercial/exchange grades. The specialty sector can ill afford a drop in production. Unfortunately, it is those who make the effort to produce specialty grades that will either lower quality to cover costs or walk away from their farms altogether. The exceptions, in terms of specialty grade, are those who have historically experienced demand at or above supply (e.g. Blue Mountain, true Antigua, estates like Costa Rica's La Minita); or those who enjoy long-term commitments from buyers at sustainable prices (i.e. Fair Trade and/or Relationship Coffee models). The former is a position to which all producers aspire, the Holy Grail of coffee farming. The later represents something more than an emerging trend in the US, Fair Trade being very specific in its parameters, including participation with coffee farm co-ops only, while Relationship Coffees are essentially self-defined, involving larger farms in a wide variety of possible arrangements. While these three scenarios may begin in different places philosophically, they all recognize, that specialty coffee has faces.

Crisis often defines communities, marking boundaries, drawing lines. September 11th may have affirmed for some of us the emotional ties to everyone who cups coffee, even if they are cupping in a range of defects our specialty palettes don't understand. But long before September, the economic relationship of what they do to what we do was emerging in deep relief as part of the same picture. It is convenient to imagine the specialty industry and the commercial industry traveling on separate roads and "never the twain shall meet." This might be true if we are talking only about the coffee in and of itself. But coffee economics, now the number one topic of conversations throughout the industry due to what is simply known now as "the crisis," demonstrate how tightly we are bound



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together. Thus the "resolution" featured on the front page of this issue of the Chronicle. It may have been difficult to imagine a few years ago, but today, we can no longer leave some to buy and roast what cannot in good conscience even be called coffee and remain silent. There is too much at stake. Coffee has faces.

In my imagination, a worker at the site finds intact the 1922 copy of *All About Coffee* that once sat on a utility shelf in the sample room of the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange. The title of the books reminds him of how good the coffee is at the coffee-break station nearby, and he decides to take a break and grab a cup. Maybe he knows the coffee has been provided by a specialty roaster, one of 82 SCAA roaster members who have to-date donated over 42,000 pounds of coffee, maybe he doesn't. He probably doesn't know that the reason the coffee is so good is because the beans were well prepared and properly brewed. He doesn't know that a 350 gram sample of the coffee when green probably had no category one defects. And he probably doesn't know, yet, that he won't be able to go back to drinking the stuff he used to drink, not without wishing for some of the coffee he was drinking when he was "at the site." That's okay, because we know. We know great coffee. We know what is and isn't coffee. We know the time has come to make sure everyone else knows it too. ■



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