



COFFEE IS HUMBLING

LAST WEEK, after hosting a group of roasters at Finca Vista Hermosa in Guatemala, I was flying back to Washington. The gentleman sitting next to me on the plane happened to ask me if I liked coffee. My response was, “I can appreciate a good cup.”

Ironically his next question was,

“so what do you do for a living?”

Now when you’re on a plane, you can be very vague and hope to get some sleep or you can give the kind of answer that commits yourself to more conversation. I apparently chose the latter. He proceeded to ask, “So what kind of coffee do you grow? I’m not an expert, but even in Seattle I’m quite picky about where I get my coffee.” I must have paused too long wondering what he really wanted to know because he felt the need to clarify “I mean, is it strong like an espresso roast? Or, what kind of blend do you grow?”

The prideful side of my brain got quite witty all of a sudden, while the more patient half of my brain yearned to understand what he really meant. My response ended up being a series of questions, and our conversation continued.

Now I don’t want to over-analyze this, but my guess is that you’ve experienced something like this during your time in coffee. Where someone asks questions that are so off-base that you’re almost unsure how to answer. Of course, it’s not just people outside the industry who do this. Do you know how many times I’ve been asked, “Have you ever thought about getting certified organic, or how about taking some of your coffee through the natural or semi-washed process?” (By the way as a quick side note: it’s never a good idea to ask a grower to experiment with their livelihood unless you’re committed to backing it up financially, regardless of the outcome).

But here’s the real question: Have you ever been “that guy?” You know, the one who is genuinely interested and eager to discuss a topic but a little misguided or lacking in information. Chances are that even with the greatest of intentions you have in fact been that guy.

On the other hand, I’ve observed people in every link in the chain, both rookies and seasoned veterans, who avoid the “that guy” syndrome like the plague. Usual reasons are pride or fear of embarrassment.

What I’ve learned over the years is that while nobody wants to be that guy, it’s actually okay when you are. In fact, I’ve decided that it’s great to be “that guy.” As long as you’re open-minded and genuine, you may be surprised to find the response is an eager friend who will genuinely reciprocate. As I think of those I learn from the most and, more importantly, those who inspire me to learn more, I see tremendous humility coupled with willingness or even insane eagerness to be “that guy.” It’s

been my personal experience that innovation is the result of many dumb questions.

An example is that for six months straight I’ve been wrestling with the question: where is the weakest link in the coffee chain? Feel free to disagree, but I’m convinced it’s two-fold. The barista and the grower. Both seem to be lacking in resources when it comes to training, education and accountability. I’ll leave it up to you to decide who bears the burden in changing this. Wrestling with this has opened up new worlds for me in both fields.

First the Barista. It’s hard to substitute time and experience, but passion carries much weight and I’ve seen many break the barriers of the learning curve in record time. I’m not sure who keeps track of these records, but they’ve got to be constantly updating them. A trait that is commonly found in learners is that they surround themselves with people who know more than they do. Baristas have this down to an effortless science. Nothing personal against baristas, but they do have a near impossible task. Think about it. The greatest number of variables to manage in less than 60 seconds, minimal pay, the least amount of training and all in a constantly changing environment.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege to teach basic cupping and advanced brewing techniques at the first barista jam in Tucson, Ariz. Have you ever been in a room where EVERYONE is “that guy?” It’s quite the high! Everyone’s a geek, everyone is welcome and everyone learns, including me.

I must admit I feel quite fortunate that as a grower I even know what a barista, much less a barista jam, is. Had I not been a barista in the past, some of the lingo would have just flown right over my head. At one point, one of the trainers said the following to the attendees: “If you’re pulling ‘em naked and you’re still experiencing channeling through a great distribution you may have cracked a well-packed puck when you knocked.” Say that ten times fast! Or, imagine that you’re a newbie just trying to understand it.

The point is that a room full of eager learners has an effect that multiplies when it comes to coffee education. When the passion is strong enough, you can’t be too embarrassed or prideful because it would only hinder you from learning. And one of the greatest things a barista as well as a grower can do is share their successes and their failures with others.

As a grower, I believe we are also a weak link. While there is incredible diversity in the barista community, we growers have them beat on this one. And we all have different methods to our madness as we deal with infinite variables. We have 365 chances to screw up a single crop. We can work very hard and not be appreciated, as well as receive much attention without putting out quality. No one said it’s a fair world, just a small one. And it’s only getting smaller. I envision one day a completely transparent market will exist in specialty coffee.

In the meantime, most growers have never tasted their own coffee. Very few get to try their coffee roasted by a great roaster, and then prepared by a skilled barista. Most would agree that there are still some great gaps that need to be filled. The industry would be less complex and would evolve much faster if a grower could bottle or can a controlled finished product just as a vintner does with wine. However as much as we like to compare coffee to wine, the industries will parallel in many ways, yet never be the same. Coffee is not only much more complex, but the additional variation in methods of processing and delivery make the complexities grow exponentially.

Obviously we have a ways to go, but I'm encouraged as I see new benchmarks every day. This week my wife and I are working on getting Q grader certified at SCAA in Long Beach with Willem Boot, and this afternoon I sat in the lab watching the Brazilian Cup of Excellence come to a close with a line-by-line narration from a Brazilian friend who was telling me about the families behind each of these coffees. I, along with over a dozen coffee friends from Colombia, Panama, Brazil, NY and LA, am treasuring this support as it is a solid step in bridging these gaps with education.

As a grower, I know our current success, as well as our future, depends on us being able to adapt to change. In other words, to be "that guy." So what does that mean? Well for starters, it means taking your questions seriously and continuing to ask our own. It also means innovations: currently, we are bringing in Tristan Currin, a cartographer and G.I.S. expert, to map out Finca Vista Hermosa. George Howell will help cup out micro lots, Aaron Blanco and Jamie van Schyndel are coordinating a two-year test on new techniques in packaging, transport and storage of green. We're working with Barefoot Coffee Roasters to train Guatemalan Baristas at the 1st International Barista Jam in Guatemala City at Anacafe. We will dry some coffee on a new dirt patio to see what a Huehue tastes like Sumatra style. We are facilitating our first barista trip, giving them the "green buyer" treatment. And last but not least, we are doing an open-sourced project where we will

pull samples out of fermentation at fixed-time increments before, during and after the cut off point with the sole goal of determining the impact of fermentation on cup quality. This is open sourced as we will pull independent feedback simultaneously from SCAA and a handful of other coffee professionals. And most of this is happening in between the time I write this and the time you read it.

So, here's the question I encourage you to ponder, assuming you have a vested interest in the health of the specialty coffee industry. How do you, as a roaster, become "that guy" when it comes to understanding the needs of a grower who produces something you depend on? I don't think I need to make an argument for why you should care. The question is what are you doing about it? How do you pursue, develop and maintain a healthy relationship that will cultivate increased mutual benefit? Just try to come up with a simple answer and you'll see how humbling coffee can be.

I think part of the answer lies in being confident only in what you know, and in realizing that it's okay to show others that you don't have everything figured out. Remember the learning stops as soon you know it all.

As if you didn't have enough on your plate already. I'm asking you to add one more thing to your to-do list this month. I urge you to try becoming "that guy," if only for a little while.

Coffee is humbling,
Edwin Martinez



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