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BARISTA

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FIELD REPORT NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

BY RACHEL NORTHROP



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NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

Maine and New Hampshire are rich with mountains, lakes, rocky coasts, and outdoor adventure. Tucked among the forested back roads and remote landscapes, Mainers and New Hampshireites are building a coffee culture that is a little Live Free or Die and a lot The Way Life Should Be.

THE FIRST PORTLAND

Maine's largest city is Portland, home to colleges, arts and creative companies, museums, and galleries. The resulting critical mass of caffeine-and culture-seekers yields a vibrant and diverse coffee community.

As its name suggests, Portland is a port city. The working waterfront handles a variety of freight, but the most common use of the port is tourism, and passengers coming ashore from cruise ships are looking for two things: "Blueberries and lobster," says Cathy Walsh, owner of Arabica Coffee, who opened the shop with her husband, John, in 1995. "We don't sell lobster, but in the summer everything has blueberries." Today, tourists stroll off the gangplank and directly into the Commercial Street café, but Arabica's coffee culture long predates Portland's recent tourism boom.

"We moved to Seattle in 1990," Cathy says. "Starbucks was just starting to open other locations and we happened to live around the corner from [latte-art legend David Schomer's famous coffee shop] Espresso Vivace, so that was the first coffee I ever had." In fact, after moving back east, Cathy and John opened Arabica using Vivace's beans, as well as coffee from respected industry author and teacher Scott Rao out of Amherst, Mass. "Scott is the one who taught John to roast," Cathy says. "John ordered this roaster modified to Scott's specifications, and he taught him to roast right in this facility."

Arabica also private-label roasts for Rwanda Bean Coffee, a small

Opposite page, at top, Mary Allen Lindeman with Elaine Garnett and Eden Lyons at CBD's branding relaunch in Portland, Maine. (Credit Russell Caron Photography) Below: Bard Coffee's revamped café in downtown Portland, features low-clearance service counters where customers can watch their beverages being created. (Photo courtesy of Bard Coffee) This page: Will Pratt on bar at Tandem Coffee's first café-roastery location in Portland. (Photo courtesy of Tandem Coffee)

coffee-import operation run by Mike Mwendata, which returns a large profit share to farmers who have minimal market access. Portland is a major refugee-resettlement community, and Mike aspires to educate Maine customers while working to alleviate smallholder poverty. "After coming from Rwanda, I was shocked seeing every corner here with a coffee shop," Mike says. "With Rwanda Bean, we want to bridge the big gap between the farmer and the consumer."

Coffee By Design, a mainstay of Portland's coffee community since it opened 23 years ago, is also deeply involved in the connection between coffee and Portland's newest residents. CBD, as it's known around town, has almost as many green-coffee retail options as roasted, which, for people recently arriving from African countries, is a small thing that makes a new place feel like home.

Mary Allen Lindeman is CBD's cofounder and has grown the business in pursuit of wonderful coffee, but also as a way to give back. "Sourcing great coffee and making an impact on social causes is our passion," she says. "Customers tell me what a difference our commitment to our community makes. From sponsorships to donations to taking a stand on issues and educating our customers, we are proud to continue to be viewed as the community coffee company where everyone is welcome." CBD's new tri-cup logo symbolizes a bird's-eye perspective that assumes a broad, holistic view of the role of coffee, cafés, and the arts in a community.

Welcoming people from all niches of a city while committing to serious sourcing is the double-wicked candle Portland's local roasters

Near Monument Square in Portland, Maine, Bard Coffee's spacious shop is filled with natural light welcoming tons of customers every day.

(Photo by Rachel Northrop) Below: Bard's redesign included a lower, more open pourover bar space to encourage customer interaction.



are steadily burning. Speckled Ax, originally started by owner Matt Bolinder in 2007 as Matt's Wood Roasted Organic Coffee, still fuels its roaster with firewood and is focused on delivering the full traceability of every coffee they serve at their small downtown café. "We're slogging our way toward full transparency in our coffee purchasing," Matt says. "Really nice coffee has always been our foundation, and a large percentage of it has been certified organic, but we want to do more."

He continues, "Getting information about how FOB prices trickle down isn't as easy as it should be—it seems we're told that every picker we encounter is receiving 'twice the average rate' for the work they do—and even when you have what seems to be good information, it's still not always clear what the right decision should be. We know that 'relationship coffee' talk is cheap, and we want to try to keep from perpetuating fraudulent claims or supporting exploitation."

Tandem Coffee Roasters is one of Portland's newest coffee (and bakery) institutions. Co-owner Will Pratt came to coffee via Blue Bottle, and Tandem's café aesthetic echoes that company's clean simplicity. "We've always wanted Tandem to feel like you were walking into our home, and I think we've done a pretty good job of keeping that feeling alive over the past five years," says Will. "All that has to be backed up by great products, but without welcoming customer service, great music, and good light we'd be up a creek." Good music is particularly important to Tandem; its new coffee-and-vinyl subscription club, The Good Thing, has been selling out every month.

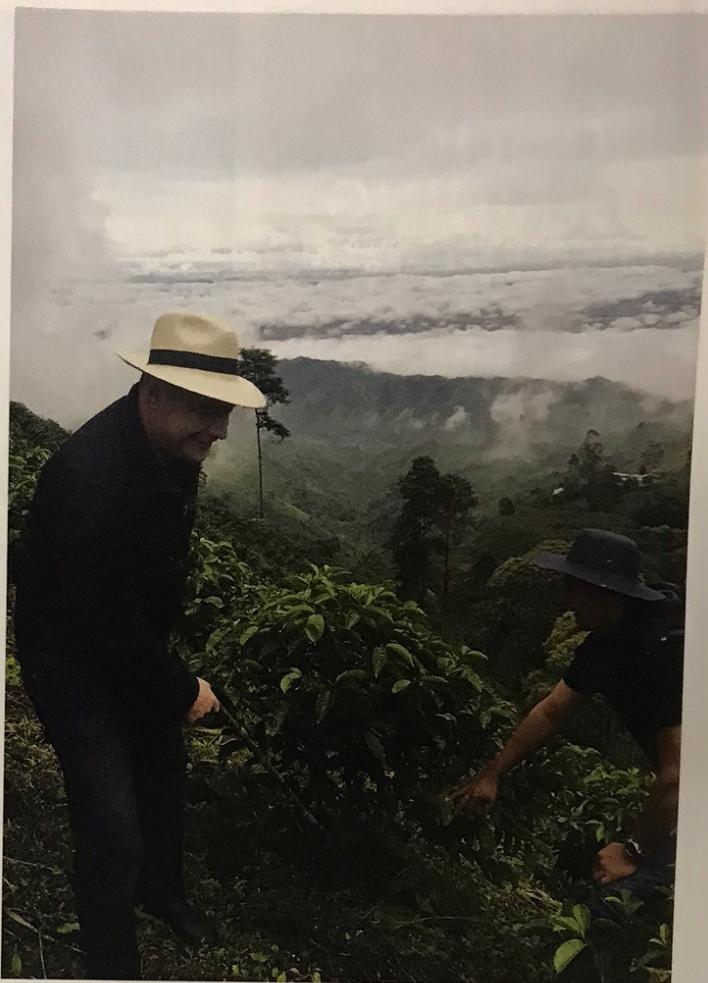
Bard Coffee also knows the value of good light. A recent overhaul tore back the blinds and uprooted the couches of the café's Central Perk-style past. Manager Brittany Feltovic is delighted by the redesign. "This whole space used to be varying shades of brown," she says. "It was all coffee colors, with couches over in the corner." Looking at the bright space and listening to roaster Bill Guddeck discuss sourcing directly from co-ops in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Cameroon, it's hard to imagine this space as anything other than light and bright.

"Since the renovation, our business has almost doubled because it attracted everyone who really wanted what we had behind the counter," says Brittany. "Customers told me, 'I never even knew that you had pourovers because they were hidden!'" The new design sets up the expectations for people when they walk through the door that this is a serious coffee space. It's still a comfortable, cozy coffee space where people can get everything done that they need to, but they see we know what we're doing."

What makes Portland cool (as a moose) is that all the shops know what they're doing. They are doing different things with different convictions, but each space is clear about its strengths. "Seventy-to-85 percent of our customers are regulars," says Brittany. "In a city with so many coffee places, we all share regulars. People come in here every day, and I'll go to Tandem or Speckled Ax and see them there, too." Portland is a layered city at the crossroads of New England tourism, art, and university life. There is coffee for everyone, and a coffee space for every coffee occasion.

NEW HAMPSHIRE: SOUTHERN N.H., THE LAKES REGION, AND THE WHITE MOUNTAINS

Like in Maine, New Hampshire's southern cities are home to larger populations before everything trickles up into northern wilderness. A&E Custom Coffee Roastery and Tea roasts in Amherst, N.H., and also has a café in Manchester, the state's largest city. The first certified-organic roaster in the state, A&E is headed by Emeran Langmaid, who started the company in 2001 with her husband, Adam. "We source coffee based on our principles: supporting progressive initiatives at ori-



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At top: Co-owner Karen Bassett models Wayfarer Coffee's locally made aprons and mugs outside the café in Laconia, N.H. (Photo by Wayfarer Coffee). A&E Custom Coffee Roastery café in downtown Manchester, N.H., is the only specialty-coffee shop in one of New Hampshire's largest cities. They are a major force leading the local Main Street craft business revival. (Photo by Rachel Northrop).



gin, sourcing primarily organic or coffees from transitioning regions, and honoring the hard work it takes to bring a quality coffee to the table by sharing the stories of the producers,” says Emeran.

Recently, Emeran and manager Rachel Niemi traveled to Capucas, Honduras, where they visited partners at the Cocafelol cooperative. The team at A&E values origin travel not just for sourcing but as community-to-community engagement, believing strongly that lessons learned abroad can be applied at home. “We cannot survive if we are not sustainable ourselves,” says Emeran. Sustainability at A&E is part of a comprehensive framework guiding daily best practices. “We respect the land, the grower, each other, and our customers,” she adds. This respect shows up in everything the company does, from participating in Honduran cultural events to rewarding reusable mugs in A&E’s cafés.

A few towns over, Flight Coffee’s owner, Claudia Barrett, delights that, after five years as a wholesaler and mail-order retailer, Flight was able to open its first café in Dover. Conceptually, Claudia compares Flight’s pourover bar to Apple’s Genius Bar. “We love sharing our passion and knowledge, and it’s fun to watch some customers get on that coffee stairway to heaven. We do run into ‘Yankee value’ and dark-roast stalwarts, but overall,

Wayfarer Coffee’s full café-roastery breathes new life into Main Street Laconia, New Hampshire. (Photo courtesy of Wayfarer Coffee)

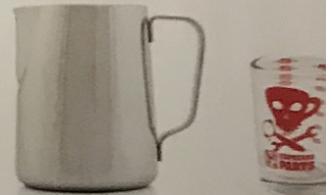
people have been super receptive.”

Claudia is recognized as a regional resource for all things coffee sensory. “We present coffee tastings in a fun way,” she says. “We take out Le Nez Du Café vials, the Counter Culture flavor wheel, and usually go up in elevation to explain acidity. We also throw in a natural Ethiopia because blueberry notes tend to hit you over the head, and the new copper gets excited and can really connect.”

Continuing north, the Lakes Region is home to two of New Hampshire’s newest roasteries. Lucas Roasting is a family business started in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley in 2007 that relocated to Alton, N.H., last year. Their experience transitioning a business to northern New England has not been as positive as the experiences of companies started by established residents, however. Troy Lucas did what he could to replicate the model established in Virginia of roasting and serving coffee at markets and regional sports venues, and supplying diverse wholesale accounts. Regrettably, his new landlord gave false hope about when ground would be broken on a permanent location, and the health inspector prohibited the sale of any prepared food or beverages from



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Troy's temporary space. Also, winter in New Hampshire is unforgiving.

"This is not what we expected at all," he says. "We're on our own; we have gotten a cold shoulder." There are unique opportunities, like selling coffee to snowmobilers on the frozen expanse of Lake Winnipesaukee, but in a small town during the dark, cold off-season, integrating into a new community has not been easy. The Granite State can be a hard place to introduce something from elsewhere, and not just because of the weather.

On the other side of the lake, Wayfarer Coffee's café and roastery is serving coffee and craft to downtown Laconia. "As we educate our customers, we have shifted our vocabulary to being more origin specific, sharing the story of the coffee, and describing flavor profiles rather than only roast profiles," says co-owner Karen Bassett. "Our customers share the excitement of this new direction."

The spacious shop also serves as a pop-up for local artists, and the café's hardware and tools (pourover stands, aprons, mugs, etc.) are made by New Hampshire craftspeople, including roaster Ben Bullerwell, who built the bar with wood from a 200-year-old Maine barn. Wayfarer is known for its *liege* waffles made with yeasted dough that are used to sandwich local meats, veggies, and cheeses, and as an excuse to eat maple syrup for lunch.

"But all this costs," says Karen, noting that commitment to local sourcing comes at a price and "has its own challenges when customers expect things to stay the same. While we value consistency in quality

A well-trained barista prepares for a tasting at Flight Coffee's Dover, N.H., shop to introduce comprehensive palate development to a new wave of specialty drinkers. (Photo courtesy of Flight Coffee)

and technique, we place a premium on change being a constant as that is the reality when you deal with real food that grows in the ground and is susceptible to its own set of challenges, especially in a harsh New England climate."

Farther north and deeper into that harsh environment, Mad River Coffee Roasters welcomes the winter, with ski areas as a major category of its wholesale accounts. Coffee and local ingredients make for evolving menus, but people like Mad River's owner-roaster Dave Levin deliver consistency that makes his New England coffee reliable. "We have recently gone from a 13-pound to a 36-pound-maximum batch roaster," he says. "This is going to save me over 10 hours a week. I will be able to spend more time with my staff for training and build the owner-customer connection to start our long-awaited coffee education series, which will include brewing, cupping, and even intro-to-roasting classes on our five-pound roaster."

As the coffee industry rushes full steam ahead into its next wave, Maine and New Hampshire exercise discerning patience and appear quite content to do things as they have always done them—on their own time, and their own terms. When they do, things are done right—solid as granite, irresistible as lobster, and as captivating, of course, as coffee. ■