
FRESH CUP
BEHIND THE BAR
Shearwater Coffee Bar
Page 12
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BEYOND CITY LIGHTS

Responsible sourcing, sustainability, and quality are more than marketable attributes for the United States' small-town specialty coffee companies; they are non-negotiable practices communicated to customers through patient conversations over the span of years. By serving rural communities beyond the boundaries of urban saturation, these small businesses have the time and space to practice everything specialty coffee preaches.

BY RACHEL NORTHROP

44 NORTH CO-OWNERS Melissa Raftery (left) and Megan Wood near their café in Stonington, Maine.

Situated on a sandy beach cove in Deer Isle, Maine, I watched as the fiery sun slowly disappeared on the horizon. On either side of me stood Melissa Raftery and Megan Wood, owners and operators of 44 North Coffee. No other person, building, or vehicle was in sight. Sensing my awe, Raftery chimed in: "We're pretty much at the end of the world up here, right?"

Deer Isle, one of midcoast Maine's numerous rocky islands, does feel a bit like the edge of the earth, which is why it is incredible that, an hour before, we cupped a Rwandan coffee to dial in the roast profile. Here, in a tiny town where the only other business open year round is the post office, a café-roastery is doing something exceptional: serving coffee that exceeds international specialty criteria to local fishermen and schoolteachers, whose only prior coffee options came from the grocery store and a Mr. Coffee maker.

But 44 North is hardly an exception; many café owners are finding success far from the bustle of cities. Though metropolitan areas—with high levels of disposable income and foot traffic—are assumed to be best poised to pay for specialty coffee's higher prices, rural areas might be better suited for this task. Cafés in small, remote towns have the advantage of a closer connection to the community and a consistent customer base. A menu of thoughtfully sourced coffee resonates with customers who understand the challenges of running a small business within a global economy, while appreciating the quality offered from a hand-crafted beverage.

THE LONG HAUL

Raftery and Wood launched 44 North in 2010. Like many rural specialty coffee operations, there is no specialty wholesaler nearby. Serving exceptional coffee requires in-house roasting.

"We started in December, which is really dismal—the few people here are in hibernation," Wood says, seated next to me on bags of green coffee lining the wall of the roastery, which is improbably located on the second floor of an old schoolhouse (a crane was required to drop in the Diedrich IR-12).

Being a local company with a fresh product would have been enough to dominate the Deer Isle coffee market, but 44 North belongs to a slice of the specialty coffee industry that does more than it has to—driven not by competition, but the absence of competitors, which allows them to focus on building strong pillars of business rather than trying to win customers from shops across town.

"We were shocked by the outpouring of support—immediately everyone was so excited about something new and different," Wood says. "We had family and friends coming in who didn't even drink coffee. It's been incredible to be a part of this

44 NORTH: Melissa Raftery scoops green coffee beans in preparation for roasting.

community and to figure out a little niche of how we can contribute."

Named for the latitude of Deer Isle, 44 North's contribution is coffee, starting with a wholesale roastery, followed by a café in Stonington, the next town on the island. Raftery and Wood source green coffee through Cooperative Coffees, meeting Maine's resolute demand for organic. The café serves only pour-overs, which is a feasible model for a town without a commuter rush or heavy lines. "Our customers are everyone from artists to tourists to fishermen," Raftery says. "While we're not opening at 3 a.m., we're here when they come in from the haul. They look forward to that afternoon cup."

It would be reductive to say 44 North uses coffee to create a community. In a town where everyone knows everyone, the café brings together artists and seasonal visitors with locals, including those employed at the working waterfront. Among this eclectic group of patrons, the café fosters a sense of connection with coffee itself, and opens the door to education on its origins.

"The first cup in the morning is a point of reflection and planning," Wood explains, "and we really like that ceremony of coffee. However you have your coffee is OK, but noticing how far it has come, to intentionally enjoy it, is what's valuable."

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HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

More than a decade ago, in another small town—this one inland in Plymouth, New Hampshire—I grew up drinking direct-trade, single-origin, better-than-fair-trade-paid, bird-friendly, shade-grown coffee without having the slightest idea.

Café Monte Alto, which roasts for both its shop and local restaurants, is the most literal example of direct trade. But save for a few lines on their packaging and the Andean fabric hanging above the bar, they don't talk about it much. Direct trade is not their angle; it is the only way they have ever done business.

"My father and his two brothers started their coffee farms in Peru's Cedro Pampa valley in the 1930s after they left Germany following the first World War. The third generation works the farms now,"

CAFÉ MONTE ALTO PHOTO BY CHRIS NORTHROP; CINDY MURPHY PHOTO BY MATT FURY

CAFÉ MONTE ALTO: The café in Plymouth, New Hampshire sells coffee sourced from producer partners in Peru.

says Micky Giunta, co-owner of Café Monte Alto.

"I always buy directly from my family and pay above fair trade because even fair trade doesn't cover their costs," she explains.

Because Giunta handles the buying and importing herself, using just a freight forwarder for customs clearance, her lens into the process is unclouded. She discussed terrorist groups, drip irrigation, the cost of copper to control leaf rust, water recycling, lack of government support, and ultimately came back to the complicated relationship between the dollar amounts we pay for coffee and how we value it.

"You're getting $1.40 for a pound of coffee and your cost of producing it is between $1.80 and $2.00. It's not business anymore. Here we can't compete with Burger King and McDonald's offering any size coffee for $0.99," she says. "We're lucky people embrace us and always come back, because we're way more expensive than anybody else in town." she says.

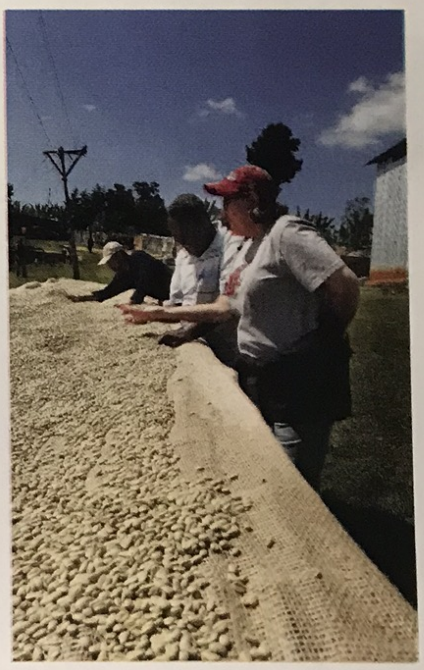
Today, unchanged from ten years ago, Café Monte Alto's bay window seats and plush cushions are the most coveted real estate on Main Street. "All the gas stations have coffee, but here, you come, you sit down, you talk. It's social."

BRINGING THE WORLD HOME

Cindy Moffitt also knows the value origin connection can bring to local communities. Her roastery, Prosum Roasters, named for the Latin word meaning "to be useful, beneficial, and do good," is based in the suburbs of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and with each origin trip she brings the world back to people who do not have the chance to travel.

"My first origin trip was in 2014 to Guatemala, up to Chiapas, Mexico, down to El Salvador. I hadn't even opened the business yet, but I knew then that this is what I wanted to do," she says.

Moffitt has since traveled to Nicaragua, Ethiopia, and Brazil to source and to learn about farming and the cultures of producers. In her travel albums, staff presentations, and enthusiastic conversations with café customers, Moffitt brings the details of these places to life, making the names of people and places more



CINDY MOFFITT in Kellensoo, Ethiopia, sourcing for Prosum Roasters.

than packaging labels; they are conversation starters and indicators that there is meaning behind the coffee.

"One of our wholesale customers is the café at the museum on the

CAFÉ MONTE ALTO PHOTO BY CHRIS NORTHROP; CINDY MOFFITT PHOTO BY MATT FURY

MOCHA JOE'S ROASTING helped certify Cameroon's first organic coffee. Farmers receive new depulpers in Cameroon's Oku Valley.

reservation of the Navajo Nation," she says. "They only buy from suppliers within Navajo Nation and loved our coffee but felt conflicted that it violated their principles. When I told them that we source from indigenous people and support indigenous communities in other parts of the world, it was like a weight was lifted, that they didn't have to compromise on that."

Prosum's understanding of its supply chain, however, is not what draws clientele. To customers, Prosum is the local coffee company, and purchasing from the community rather than a national chain is what customers are most excited about. "There is a real culture of 'support local' in Albuquerque," Moffitt says. "I've heard so many times, 'Oh I didn't know I had a local option! Of course I'd love to work with you rather than buying coffee out of state.'"

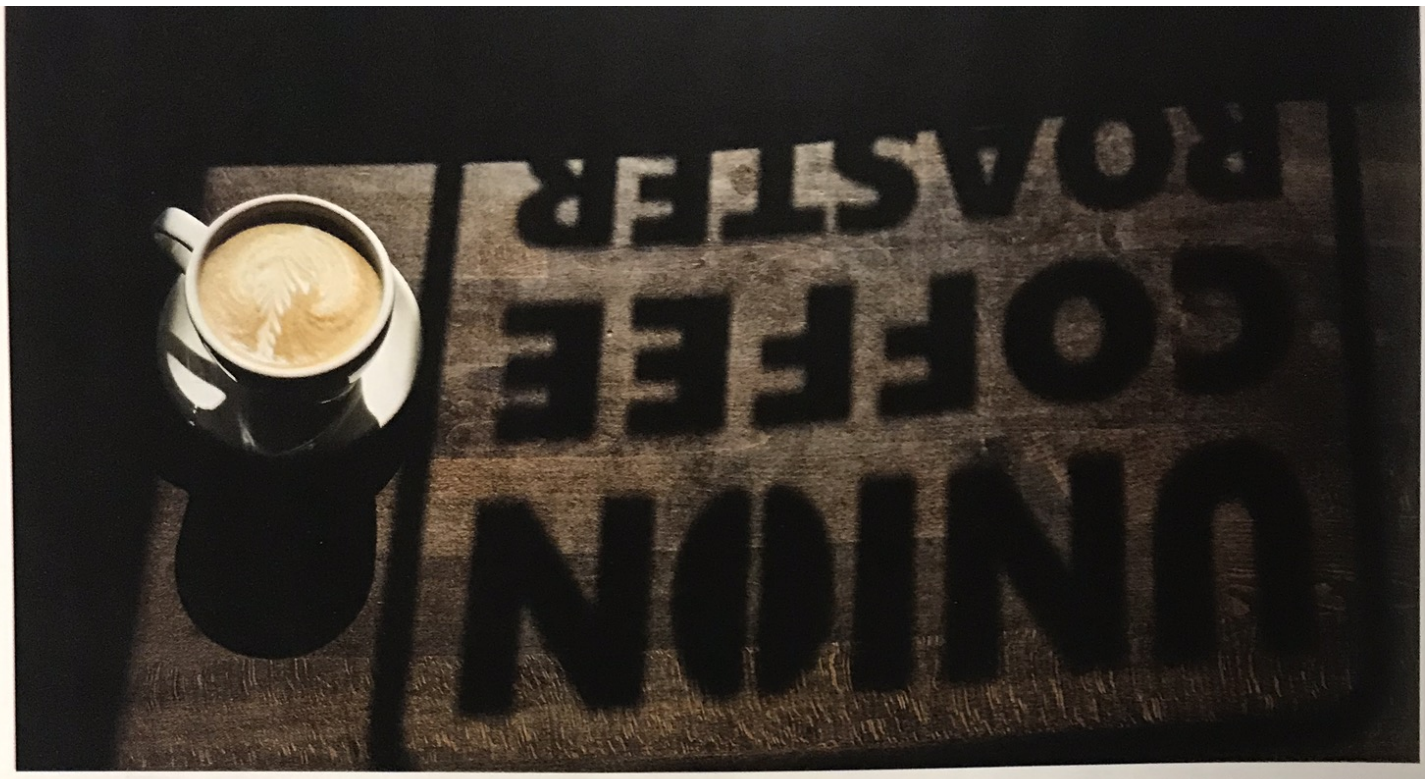
UNTOLD ORIGIN COMMITMENTS

In Brattleboro, Vermont, Mocha Joe's Roasting Company began partnering with producers before it was popular. They started ten years ago with producers in Cameroon, based on a suggestion by a Cameroonian customer who worked at the local university. Since then, owner Pierre Capy has developed long-term purchasing relationships in Sumatra, Bolivia, and Guatemala, while building a mill in the Oku Valley and certifying Cameroon's first organic coffee.

> "Customers buy from us because we've been around for [twenty-five years], have really good coffee, and roast locally."

Roaster Erik Johnson sees a crucial connection between Mocha Joe's lack of talking about what they do and their ability to do it. "We don't sell a narrative or market anything. Customers buy from us because we've been around for [twenty-five years], have really good coffee, and roast locally," he says.

PHOTO BY PIERRE CAPY



UNION COFFEE ROASTERS focuses on quality small-lot roasting. Operations manager Carrie Medley (below, right) also prioritizes customer service.

Mocha Joe's also benefits from the consistency of its rural surroundings. "We have a customer base, so we don't have to spend to draw people into our shop," Johnson says. "That frees up our money to go to Cameroon, Guatemala, and Sumatra. We can do it because people are committed to us."

Stubbornly sticking to values has built Mocha Joe's identity, not marketing. "That's what makes a place a place—this is how we do it here," Johnson affirms.

KEEPING MAIN STREET ALIVE

Abiding by strict values has also led to success for Union Coffee Roaster, a café-roastery in Ayer, Massachusetts (also, coincidentally, on Main Street). But Carrie Medley, Union's operations manager, recognizes that sharing those values isn't what draws customers in.

"In a place where specialty coffee isn't a thing and most people don't come in looking for it, we want to be approachable," Medley says. "We will give people as much information as they want and we are always looking for an ear to share what we have learned."

I first met Medley at the Mid Atlantic Northeast Coffee Conference (MANE) in Providence, Rhode Island, where she was diligently taking notes and asking questions. Her husband and co-owner, Jesse, shares the same passion for learning. "I overdo everything. In all my free time now I'm reading about coffee," he admits. The two recently returned from a trip to Nicaragua, their first time to origin.

Much of what they are pursuing—travel to origin, attentive sensory analysis, focus on quality small-lot roasting, self-assigned late night coffee reading—sounds familiar to the current young, hungry specialty roasting cohort. But unlike many other roasters, Union has very little competition. Why bother focusing on the details and making more work for themselves?

"Starting off, you can only buy what you can afford. Our goal has always been to source based on what we like but also what benefits people," Medley says. Union wants to sell coffee people love, and they do. She and Jesse entered the market to do what they find valuable—hold themselves to quality standards and source fully traceable

coffees that adequately compensate farmers. "If we keep doing this, our customers will find us," she says.

And they have. Local teacher meetings, business planning sessions, and casual conversations all take place over the coffee the Medleys labor to provide. The café also has a kids' corner filled with toys and books.

In rural towns with one coffee hub, there is plenty of room for local community and obsessive coffee to coexist under the same roof, whether or not customers invest in the details behind each coffee's origin. Customers valuing the space translates to the price of the product, allowing the owners to reinvest in sourcing the kind of coffee they believe in.

AS COFFEE IS TO LOBSTER

Back on Deer Isle, Wood observes the unexpected parallels between lobster fishing and coffee farming. "Stonington is the country's largest lobster port. 80 percent of the country's lobster comes from here. I went to school for United States foreign policy with a concentration in Latin America and a little bit in agriculture, and I didn't intend to be back here," she says. "I thought I would work for a nongovernmental organization or the government. Studying extract markets, environmental consequences, and migrations was foreign, international study."

For Wood, it has been inspiring to build a company that welcomes both vacationers and the raw, jagged coastline's workers.

Moving back to Maine, she realized all the things she has studied applied to her hometown, too. "We're dependent on our fisheries. Being aware of our ecosystems and our climate is a constant conversation. We export our number-one resource, lobster, and quarried granite too," she says.

Like coffee farming regions, Deer Isle relies on international markets to support the local economy. "What I thought was to be studied in other countries about other people and other problems is profoundly relevant in our local community. It's not the other; it's here."

Maybe it's because America's rural communities understand coffee farming through their own experiences in ways that urban businesses cannot, but it is in these unassuming places that specialty coffee humbly realizes its potential and resolutely delivers equitability, quality, and engagement without compromising any conviction.

BOTH COFFEE AND LOBSTER rely on international markets to support the local economy.