

LA JOLLA LIGHT

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Bird Rock merchant stirs up coffee business

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By Dave Schwab (daves@lajollalight.com)

Bird Rock Coffee Roasters is taking specialty coffee to a whole new level.

The cornerstone Bird Rock merchant is one of a dozen coffee roasters nationwide participating in the Las Mingas Project, which rewards indigenous coffee growers for exemplary work. Through this project, farmers, in such places as Colombia, and specialty roasters establish mutually beneficial sustainable relationships.

"It's about helping farmers improve the quality of their crop and then paying them transparently," said Chuck Patton, owner of the independent, home-grown La Jolla business. "There's a really open paper trail. I can follow my dollar from La Jolla to Colombia."

Another step

Patton was an early proponent of marketing organic coffee grown without man-made fertilizer or pesticides, but he wanted to take environmentally conscious organic growing one step further.

In September, he traveled to Colombia to meet with independent coffee growers sampling more than 100 varieties.

"We selected the best to bring back to the neighborhood," Patton noted.

Bird Rock Coffee Roasters now offers three distinct microlots - limited-edition coffee grown within microclimates on a single farm that has undergone special preparation. The product of one such microlot farmer, Colombian Anival Gomez, is now being featured at the coffee brewery at 5627 La Jolla Blvd.

The 'tasting' experience

More than mere merchant, Patton is a coffee connoisseur. On Fridays, he invites the public into his "tasting room," where they're educated about java's intricacies.

"We're taking people that are just blindly drinking coffee and deconstructing it, teaching them that it's as complex as a fine glass of wine," Patton said. "It opens up a whole new world for them."

Like wine tasting, guests sample the aroma and taste of varying organic and nonorganic brews, giving them a greater appreciation for the diversity and quality of the end product.

"We do this with every sample that we get to make sure it's worth buying," Patton said. "We also experiment with making adjustments in the roast."

Different coffee-growing areas produce distinctive blends. Sumatran coffees have an earthier taste. Ethiopian coffees can have berry or fruity tones. Colombia produces clean, well-balanced coffees.

Patton said coffee prices have been stable recently but are projected to go up about 20 percent this year because of the world recession, greater demand, a rainy harvest in 2008 that decreased yields and because of rising production costs. Fertilizer, for instance, has risen 141 percent over 2007.

Las Mingas means working together for a common goal.

"We're not only developing an individual relationship with growers," said Patton, "but with exporters and importers. It's crucial because it maintains a great supply."



Chuck Patton of Bird Rock Coffee Roasters visits with Colombia farmers whose brews he markets.
Photo by: Courtesy

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