

IS OUR CURRENT SYSTEM SUSTAINABLE? BY MARTY CURTIS

Addressing Vulnerabilities to Our Industry

As I was sitting in Brazil having breakfast with some new coffee friends, one of them asked, “Marty, how did you get started in Coffee?”

Well it’s kind of a long story. But if we go back to the late 60’s early 70’s, I was down at the Pike Place Public Market and the piers to just mess around for the day. Well, I walked into a place on the piers called Wet Whiskers and they had an old John Deere Royal Roaster. Some great ice cream, too. As we were waiting for our ice cream, they were roasting some coffee. As I walked away, I remember looking back at the piers and it looked like it was on fire, with smoke billowing from it. This was because they vented their roaster downward below the pier.

Move forward about 6 years to late 1977, when I was discharged from the USAF. I came back to Seattle to visit family before heading to Oregon to finish my schooling for Electrical Engineering. Well as things turned out, I decided to go work with my Dad. He was working on installing gas lines for a company called Starbucks. As I was helping put the gas lines in, a Semi pulled up and on the outside it was marked scrap metal/junk. So Jerry Baldwin, Gordon and Zeb were standing there like little kids waiting to open the container. Once it was open I asked them what it was. They then informed me it was a German-made coffee roaster and that they were going to put it together. As we talked, I found out that they had no one to assemble the roaster, or drawing or diagrams. So I spoke up, “I can do it!” Six weeks later we had a running roaster. Now, it may have not been 100% correct, but it was turning and getting hot. So over the next few years, I worked in Starbucks’s roasting plant building roasters and silos and a way to flavor coffee using a unique turntable system, among other things.

As I worked more and more in the coffee industry, I was continually running into people who just wanted good coffee. Then I was asked by Grady Saunders of Heritage Coffee to give a course in air pollution. So I started doing some courses for the SCAA. As I volunteered, I met a great bunch of people trying to do the right things for the industry for the right reason. As we started to move the Specialty industry to mainstream coffee, it became necessary to build consistency and reproducibility so we could help standardize processes to speak and work worldwide in a common language. So the SCAA started the Technical standards committee, of which I am a member. The thing that most intrigued me was the openness and willingness to share on the issues we have.

As I grew in the coffee industry I tried to do the same. Which brings me to the actual coffee we are getting today. Has coffee gotten that much better? Or have we just been doing a better job of sourcing the coffees? Perhaps a combination of both? As a young person in coffee, I was mainly working with roasting equipment. But the more I worked with the equipment, it became very clear I needed to learn to taste the coffees so I could better understand what a person wanted their roaster to do. So as I grew in the industry I have seen a lot of changes in roasting levels, styles and processes. But the coffee we are getting today is quite different than 30 years ago. Some of this is possibly due to the way the farmer now picks their coffee more selectively. I'm sure it's partly due to the way they have learned to process the coffees. Some change has come from their ability to identify the differences in the micro-climates on the farm, and better husbandry.

But who has gained from all this? The farmer, retailer, wholesaler, or consumer? We the consumers have for sure, as we now have better coffee. The Roaster and Retailer have been hugely economically compensated. But has the farmer realized economic benefit similar to the retailers or roasters? I'm still not sure they have. I believe the farmer will not realize the gain until we actually have programs for the farmer on truly evaluating their coffee from seed to cup. This gives farmers tools so they can truly evaluate the coffee on their farms. There have been programs to help, but they are limited in their funding and availability, as well as a clear course of learning. We currently teach them to cup coffees from around the world and not what their coffee truly can taste like.

Maybe it's time we build a program for teaching farmers how to taste their coffee, and what the defects of improper processing or handling will taste like. We still need to work with the brokers, roasters, retailers and consumers to help them understand that pricing needs to be fair throughout the supply chain. I still hear successful businesses in the coffee industry remark about the cost of green coffee today, yet it seems their profits are soaring. Can the Specialty Coffee system truly survive without the proper distribution of knowledge, wealth and sustainability?