

WAKE UP

and smell the coffee beans

by Judi Burton

On frigid winter mornings, you wake up blurry eyed and disheveled.

You tiptoe your way across the cold kitchen floor and pour yourself a much-needed mug of steaming coffee, which you always have on a timer so that it is ready for you when you arise. You gently blow across the brim, making ripples and releasing a rich aroma that swirls up through your nose and brightens your eyes. You tuck back into your chair and enjoy the awakening of your consciousness. But is your coffee conscious, or shall we say conscientious? Does it come from an organic farm that has a school, doctor's office, sponsored baseball team, and housing for its workers? Are the workers paid a living wage? Does the coffee bag have Rainforest Alliance bragging rights? Did the roasters burn the coffee? How long has that bag been sitting on the shelf before you bought it? Do you feel good about the coffee you are sipping?



There are hundreds of varieties of coffee. You have to choose the place of origin, Arabica or Robusta, dark roast, mild, flavored; the list goes on and on. Coffee lovers across the

planet have helped places like Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Columbia and Nicaragua become producing countries. That

is all well and good for the owners of the farms, but what about the environment, workers and their families?

Cashua Coffee is a small roaster in Florence, SC. The two founders, Josh Campbell of Myrtle Beach and Jason Savage of Columbia, have many things in common, but their main similarities are coffee and a conscience. They were young boys when they first met in a haunted house on Halloween. The two were equally terrified and stuck together through their spooky ordeal. After that, they were inseparable. Years later, they bonded even more with their love of coffee. They graciously invited me to their roastery, so that I could experience what roasting coffee is like. Let's just say, I got more than I bargained for.

A small Baptist church shrouded the tiny roasting building from the street. Parishioners were making their way in. I could hear gospel music emanating across the driveway and wondered if I were in the right place. Jason was outside waving me in, and then I smelled the unmistakable aroma of roasting coffee.

Upon entering, I was surprised, then laughed heartily as I took in the ridiculous ambience. (I mean ridiculous in a good way, of course, as you will see.) The roastery felt more like a "man cave" complete with arcade games, an Otis Spunkmeyer cookie oven, and an altar dedicated to the late, great Elvis Presley. The floor was a flashy, black and white checkerboard linoleum and there was a huge stainless steel roaster with a spotlight above it towering over the scene. Bulging burlap bags filled a corner of the room. "Welcome," said Josh, "and make yourself at home." They explained that the building used to be a hair salon and a storage building

for a grocery store before that. A mannequin head stared at me as if to say, "Well, what did you expect?"

They offered me a sandwich and iced tea, which was very thoughtful of them. We munched and talked over the whirring of the roaster. I asked them about their label "Never Burned." Josh was quick to answer; "A lot of people's palates want the really strong overcooked flavor. We really like the character of the bean to come out. When you overcook it, that burned flavor seems to take over, rather than tasting the origin." He explained that Indonesian has earthy tones, whereas Ethiopian expresses a fruity quality and Colombian is famous for a nutty-chocolaty flavor. "We hate for all of that to be lost in over roasting. Plus, a lot of people ask us to not burn it. I guess it's kind of our signature."

We finished our sandwiches and Jason showed me the roaster. The eight-foot-tall machine looked very well cared for, but not very technologically up to date. There were no flashy lights or touch screens. "We take an artisan approach to our roasting," said Jason. "We rely on our senses to tell us when the beans are cooked just right." He heaved a huge bag of beans onto his knee and gently poured them into a bucket. I noticed they were much smaller than the finished product and had a white-green color. "As the beans cook, water is released from the beans making them brown and expand," he said, as he lifted the five-gallon bucket over his head and poured the beans in the hopper. He lifted a

handle and the beans fell into the drum of the roaster, where they will cook. A flick of the switch and the beans were tossed about inside. A small window allowed me to see the progress.



I asked him how they got started in the business. I was expecting an answer like, "We worked at coffee shops," or something similar, but the answer I got was even more shocking than the linoleum: "We couldn't find a coffee that we really liked, so we decided to roast our own," Jason said. "Our first roaster was a popcorn popper. You know, the old ones with the yellow plastic lid." I just about choked on my tea when I heard that. "A popcorn popper?" I exclaimed. He nodded. "We started giving the coffee away to my mom, neighbors and friends and realized we couldn't keep supporting everyone's habit without some cash flow. We built bigger roasters and then we finally bought this one."

"Tell me about the 'Rainforest Alliance' and the 'shade grown' emblems on your packages." Jason explained: "We have visited many of the farms we buy from, and most of them, especially in South America, are in rainforests. It is important to us that we buy from farms who only trim a small amount of the forest for growing purposes, but allow

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other trees to grow and add to the canopy. There are trees like citrus and banana—not grown to farm but to maintain the integrity of the ecosystems—that thrive in those regions. We know those farms are keeping up a healthy environment in their rainforest.” He went on to talk about the organic label as well. “It’s a tricky thing. We like to deal with the smaller farms. If a smaller farm has enough money and does the proper steps, they can become organic certified across the board. We visited a small farm a while back. They did everything exactly the same on the whole estate. They only had enough monetary resources, because, of course, they’re in a third world country, to certify only a certain amount of bags. We saw it, we were there, and the whole farm could have been certified. We’re not strictly organic; we do it as much as possible. But we tend to look at the whole picture. Are the workers treated fairly? How do they tend to their rainforest? Most important, how does the coffee taste? If it’s gross and organic, that doesn’t do us any good.”

“You touched on how they treat their workers,” I said. He nodded and said: “The one in Nicaragua, Selva Negro, has a school, a doctor’s office and a baseball team. All of the workers seemed very happy and appreciate their job. They take care of their workers and their families.”

“Then there’s the issue of fair trade,” I said. The bags have that stamp on it as well. Many coffee farmers are told what their prices can be through Wall Street. Sometimes a pound of coffee sold in stores here in America was actually sold for 30 cents from the farm. The price difference is astounding. Jason, who is very aware of this dilemma, said: “We bypass Wall Street. We’re just a small local roaster. We buy directly from the source and always pay a fair price.”

I could see through the little window that the beans were a beautiful brown color now. Jason kept pulling out a metal scoop under the window to check on them every few seconds. Finally, he bent down and pulled a lever. The beans rushed out in a billow of coffee-scented smoke into a huge flat bowl with arms that stirred the beans around and around. The scent of chocolate chip cookies mingled in the air with the coffee as someone pulled out a tray from the little cookie oven.

The last thing I wanted to ask about was the freshness. Josh chimed in: “We are roasting tonight, and it will be on the shelves tomorrow. If we see a bag has been sitting at a store for a month, we’ll pull it. Most of the time, we don’t need to, though. We’re pretty accurate with the amount that we distribute.”

“What if I moved to California? No more Cashua for me?” I asked. “Actually, we have a lot of people in the military who love our coffee,” Josh responded. “They get shipped around so much, we had to accommodate them. You can get a subscription online and we’ll send it to you anywhere in the country.”



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“By the way, we’re looking for a bagger,” he said, smiling, as he bit into a warm, gooey cookie. I imagine he will treat whomever it is they hire for that position pretty well, considering our discussion on fair trade and other related issues.

Later, as I was driving home, I could smell the scent of roasted coffee beans lingering on not just my clothes, but my skin as well. The next morning, I made myself a cup of Cashua coffee and smiled, knowing that my conscience was at ease as I sipped away. I reflected on the fact that a company can be small, successful and have a conscience at the same time. Cashua’s dreams are not to become some huge coffee conglomerate. They’re living their dream already.

For more info, contact Cashua Coffee at 843-455-7883, visit CashuaCoffee.com.

Cashua Coffee can be found in Florence at **Aroma Underground** at 700 Pamplico Hwy in Murrells Inlet at **Lee’s Farm** at 4883 Hwy 17, **Ebb & Flow Art Co-op** at 4763 Hwy 17, **The Cigar House** at 3335 Bus 17 S ; in Pawleys Island at **Litchfield Chocolate & Coffee House** at 267 Willbrook Blvd in Conway at **Crady’s** at 332 Main St; and in Myrtle Beach at **Toffino’s Deli and Bakery** at 880 Farrow Pkwy, **East End Cigar** at 7708 N Kings Hwy, and **Broadway Cafe & Gourmet** at 509 Broadway St.