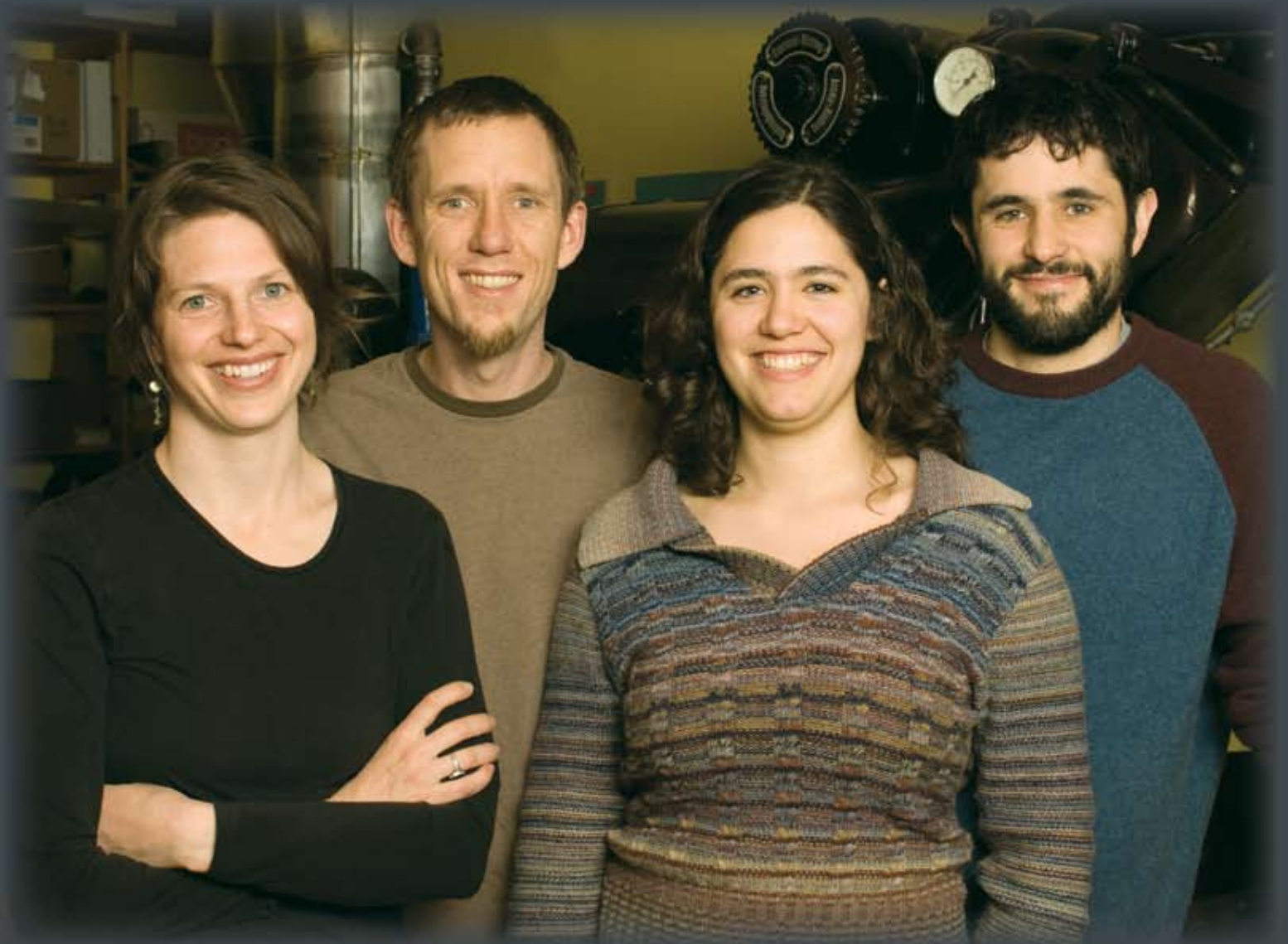


roast



MAGAZINE

2010 Micro Roaster of the Year



KICKAPOO COFFEE

2010 Micro Roaster of the Year

BY
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PROMOTING THE twin goals of high-quality coffee and fairness to the farmer has become increasingly common among specialty roasters. With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that Kickapoo Coffee is helping to lead the charge on both fronts, as the roaster counts both a former boutique wine importer as well as a one-time botanist and Latin American studies expert among its owners.

“There’s a very healthy tension at times when we’re trying to drive the course of our business,” explains TJ Semanchin, who studied sustainable development in Costa Rica for many years before eventually joining fellow co-owner Caleb Nicholes at Kickapoo. “Occasionally, those decisions aren’t always complementary—to pursue the highest quality versus the deepest relationship [with growers]. But what we really appreciate is these two passions drive us to a place where we can try to raise the bar in both areas.”

Kickapoo Coffee—*Roast* magazine’s Micro Roaster of the Year—is certainly on the right track. Kickapoo roasted its first batch of coffee in November 2005 but has already received several plus-90 scores from the *Coffee Review* rating website, including an outstanding 95 for its fair-trade Colombia Fondo Paez. The company also purchases roughly 80 percent of its coffees through direct, long-term relationships with small-scale producers, a rarity among resource-limited micro roasters. And through it all, the company has maintained a dedication to sustainable practices at both the farm and roaster level, including paying a minimum of 10 cents above the fair-trade/organic premium for all its coffees, virtually eliminating plastic from all roastery operations, and cultivating an engaged local customer base. It’s no wonder that Kickapoo Coffee is making an impact in the Wisconsin coffee scene.

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THE WINNER'S STATS

Established 2005

Location Viroqua, Wis.

Employees 3 owners, 1 additional full-time employee

Retail locations No

Roasters (machines)
Refurbished German G-30 Probat, and a two-barrel Jabez Burns sample roaster

Pounds per Year
Projected 75,000 pounds of coffee in 2009

Website www.kickapoocoffee.com



Merging Priorities and Strengths

Like many coffee roasters, Nicholes and Semanchin didn't start out with coffee on the brain. Nicholes veered dangerously close to a career in academia—he majored in classical languages in college—but took a last-minute U-turn and plunged instead into the foodie world. He spent the next several years working at high-end restaurants and developing a palate for boutique European wines, which culminated in a stint as a wine importer. Family eventually beckoned, however, and Nicholes left the wine business to be closer to his young son in rural Wisconsin. Having roasted coffee at home for the previous five years, he opened Kickapoo Coffee in Viroqua, Wis., in 2005, reasoning that the region wasn't ready for a boutique wine business but that good coffee was universal.

Semanchin entered the business under much different circumstances, having used Costa Rican coffee cooperatives as case studies for sustainable development in the mid to late '90s. Through his work, Semanchin grew intrigued by the social potential of small coffee cooperatives, which he believed had more promise for community empowerment and growth than most other international export products. Upon returning to the United States in 1999, Semanchin connected with a small fair-trade startup called Peace Coffee and entered the supply side of the business. He joined Nicholes at Kickapoo Coffee in early 2006, several months after Nicholes opened the roastery.

Although Nicholes and Semanchin may have started from different places, their priorities have merged over time. “My drive when I came into the business was organics, fair trade, and my connections in Latin America,” says Semanchin. “But over the years [at Peace Coffee], I began to develop a much deeper appreciation for quality and for the amazing product that coffee is. And while I was moving closer to Caleb's core, Caleb had started really learning about the coffee industry and grew more interested in fair-trade and direct-trade relationships.”

While many micro roasters source high-quality coffee through importers, it's much more difficult for them to develop meaningful connections with growers compared to larger roasters because of the



From small-scale farmers to small-scale roasters, The Kickapoo Coffee coffee chain (from left to right) Carew Halleck (cafe owner), TJ Semanchin (Kickapoo Coffee), Monika Firl (Cooperative Coffees producer-relations manager), Anner Roman Netra (president of Cenfrocafe Cooperative), Cesar Camacho (Cenfrocafe), Lucia Zurita Zurita and Jesus Piña Zurita (farmers and Cenfrocafe co-op members).

time and resources involved. Kickapoo overcomes these limitations through its membership in Cooperative Coffees, a green importing cooperative of 24 North American roasters dedicated to forging equitable trading relationships with coffee farmers throughout the world. The co-op helps small roasters pool their buying power to purchase larger quantities of coffee, which in turn makes it easier to establish and maintain relationships with additional farmer co-ops. Among the organization's many activities: facilitating trips to origin for cooperative members; promoting social and quality initiatives on the farm level, such as purchasing new depulpers or building new wells; and arranging pre-harvest financing when requested by the grower.

To better support the farmer relationship, Nicholes and Semanchin have made several trips to origin in the past few years, each time focusing on how they can support new quality initiatives on the farm level. Earlier this year, Nicholes and Semanchin teamed up with Cooperative Coffees and Catholic Relief Services to visit Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively. The trips were designed to help growers share information on growing and processing techniques through collaborative workshops, but they also included sessions on roasting and cupping techniques.

Crucially from Kickapoo's perspective, Cooperative Coffees also solicits business input from its producing partners at its annual meetings, going so far as to provide scholarships for select farmers to travel to the host country (typically a producing country such as Nicaragua or Guatemala).

“It really puts some teeth behind the statement that farmer cooperatives are our partners,” explains Nicholes. “We get to learn about the challenges faced by farming cooperatives, and we're able to express what the landscape looks like as far as financial realities and what we're able to pay. It really gives everyone a better context for the business relationship.”

And Kickapoo's business relationships have produced some outstanding single-origin coffees. In addition to Colombia Fondo Paez, Kickapoo sells an organic Guatemalan coffee from the Rio Azul cooperative that received a 91 rating from *Coffee Review*; a full-bodied, sweet biodynamic Brazilian coffee from the Cooperbio cooperative; and an organic Ethiopian Sidamo from the Shoye cooperative that displays hints of citrus and a crisp finish. All but two of Kickapoo's suppliers are FLO-certified fair trade and certified organic.

As to which coffees Nicholes and Semanchin enjoyed most in 2009, the roasters diverge on this count. A self-proclaimed “sucker for Kenyans,” Nicholes preferred a Kenya AA from the Kangocho cooperative, which he describes as “classic, with black currant and cassis flavors and citrusy overtones.” The Kenyan coffee was one of the few that Kickapoo didn't buy through a direct-trade relationship, as most Kenyan coffees are sold through auction. They're working to establish a direct relationship in the future, however. For his part, Semanchin has a soft spot for the Colombian Fondo Paez, not only because of the refined flavors—he describes it as

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offering Kenyan-like qualities—but also because of his relationship with the co-op. “I can picture the growing conditions and I know the growers, who are indigenous Paez farmers using extremely traditional agricultural techniques but with a commitment to quality,” says Semanchin. “These guys have preserved their culture, their language and even their growing techniques, and it comes through in the coffee.”

Roasting Essentials

Kickapoo’s headquarters are situated in Viroqua’s one-time train depot, a restored historic building that houses the company’s four full-time employees (including the owners) and the roastery’s centerpiece: a vintage 1930s G-30 Probat. The 30-kilo roaster is a true rarity—Nicholes and Semanchin haven’t been able to confirm whether another G-30 is operational in the United States—but functions as the best vintage roasters do, with a heat-retaining predictability that helps the coffee develop sweetly and consistently. Each coffee is roasted in a small, handcrafted batch to preserve

flavor and allow for maximum freshness.

The roaster isn’t the only vintage item in Kickapoo’s facility. The company maintains a Jabez Burns sample roaster from the early 20th century that Nicholes refers to as a “gorgeous old cast-iron workhorse.” Kickapoo also vacuum seals its prepackaged coffees using a vintage canner that blends seamlessly into the surroundings. And throughout the facility visitors can see bits and pieces of local history, including reclaimed studs from the train depot’s original build, locally crafted cabinets and green coffee bins made of formaldehyde-free plywood, and handmade roaster belts supplied by local Amish craftsmen.

Although Kickapoo isn’t located in a specialty coffee hotbed, the Viroqua community is gradually responding to the company’s dedication to “full transparency in coffee flavor”—in other words, roasting light enough to express a coffee’s true potential. “In our marketplace, we’re generally the lightest by an order of magnitude,” says Nicholes. “But we work hard to source really high-quality coffees that have more natural flavor, so we can get away with roasting them lighter and revealing those characteristics. And it seems to be working.”

Among Kickapoo’s wholesale strategies is to sell its coffee at specialty cafes and like-minded food co-ops, and as fresh-roasted coffee shares through a large organic community-supported agriculture (CSA) program in the region. Customers have also responded to Kickapoo’s reusable, recyclable coffee cans, which feature original artwork designed by a Viroqua-based woodcut artist. The containers have been a hit, as the highly prized cans fill a variety of post-coffee roles around the home. The containers also help fulfill Kickapoo’s goal of minimizing the use of plastic in all roasting operations.

Kickapoo uses the cans — made



of 80 percent post-consumer recycled steel — for prepackaged coffee, and ships the remainder of its coffee in 1-pound bags with biodegradable glycine liners or 5-pound biodegradable kraft paper bags.

Focus on the Future

Of all the sustainable initiatives supported by Kickapoo Coffee, the most important day-to-day initiative for the owners is to make sure everyone working at the roastery—which includes Nicholes’s sister and Semanchin’s wife—takes the time to relax once the work is done. To that end, Kickapoo is closed on Fridays so that folks can enjoy a designated family day. The task for Kickapoo, however, is to maintain the family-friendly focus, sustainable business practices and quality of the coffee while also growing the business. “We need to do the things we set out to do and then do them better,” says Semanchin. “We have the Kickapoo family and our extended family—essentially the people we’re buying from and the people we’re selling to. And we really need to keep that at the core while still staying ahead of it, too.”

Kickapoo anticipated some of its initial growth, which is why it renovated the train depot with room to double or triple output without pushing past the breaking point. As for the future beyond that? Nicholes and Semanchin aren’t sure what will happen next but promise to adhere to the same principles they applied when starting the company: to find the perfect roast in collaboration with their farmer-partners.

