

roast



M A G A Z I N E

March | April 2007



Dedicated to the Success of Coffee Roasters

"Three of the four elements are shared by all creatures, but fire was a gift to humans alone."

—*Still Life with Woodpecker*
Tom Robbins

Who are The Firestarters? They are the people who relish the intimate relationship with the flame afforded by coffee roasting. Many of them are recognizable by the singed hairs on their arms and the mischievous grins on their faces.

We decided to talk with some of these roasters to find out what keeps them lit and see if maybe they'd tell us a story or two around the old chaff fire.

getting to know Michael Calabrese



Years Roasting

Been firing it up for roughly 16 years.

Equipment Used

Jabez Burns 4-bagger, built in 1928 on West 48th and 11th. We overhauled her a bit in '97, but a good portion is still mint. I also use a Diedrich 24K, built circa '92.

What horse do you like in the third race at Belmont?

There's a horse on the East Coast circuit right now by the name of Bella Calabria, which is the Italian interpretation of my precious 16-month-old's name, Annabel Lee Calabrese.

MICHAEL ANGELO CALABRESE is from New York and calls himself the roastmaster extraordinaire for Kobricks Coffee Company, one of the oldest independent coffee roasters in the country. On his way to the track he told me all about apocalyptic dreamscapes, the benefits of the roasting community, and how even though he thinks of himself more as Dallas Winston from S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, we can all identify with Pony Boy.

Christopher Schooley: Give me a rundown of all your tattoos.

Michael Calabrese: Here goes. My left arm features the vampire bat. He's perched upon my nickname, Cal, done in Old English script. They both rest above an ankh. A trail of spiders makes up the wristband. My good buddies Doom and Mung slapped that ink on me. It's all in grayscale and black.

My right arm is a bit more involved. I worked in consort with the artist, Denise DeLacerda, to create a swirling, apocalyptic dreamscape. We borrowed a bit from the artist Gustave Dore, took poetic license with our visions, and went from there. The centerpiece is the crimson ghost, but Denise crafted a gaggle of gargoyles that pretty much enmesh the entire piece. It took 12 sittings, with the touches of color going last. Denise deftly worked her unique magic on the canvas that is Michael. Any talk of my ink must be peppered with copious mentions of her, because she is amazing.

CS: What is your first coffee-related memory?

MC: Both of my parents worked at the Maxwell House plant in Hoboken during its salad days of the '50s and '60s. My mom left once my oldest brother was born, so it was just my father there by the time I was a kid. When I was about five years old, he was working on the freeze-dried project. Odd thing is, all the workers involved had to wear their "whites," which makes no damn sense. Working with agglomerated powder while dressed head-to-toe in white? Strange.

My father worked the four to midnight shift, and I always waited up for him to get home. It was tough feigning sleep with my mom, but I succeeded more often than not. He would get home around 1 a.m., and the stench of the blow-down liquor (from the agglomeration spray tower) permeated every inch. I said "head to toe" before, because all of the crew was required to wear a white paper hat. Well, my father tried his damndest NOT to wear that hat. He always looked like he just stepped off a movie set, and he never had a hair out of place. So, by the time he got home, the hat was rendered totally useless. But I snagged it each night, and compiled quite a collection. It reeked of agglomerated powder...it's hard to convey that stench to someone who never got a whiff.

I'll be damned if I didn't wear those hats everywhere. My father was the coolest, and anything I could get from him was like gold. I caught a lot of heat from the neighborhood kids about the hats, and it was smacked off my head just about every day. I kept picking it up, dusting it off, and fighting right the hell back.

CS: How did you become a coffee roaster?

MC: I started working for Maxwell House in the late '80s. I was a tech in the R&D lab. One of our main tasks was to visit the various production plants around the country. I worked primarily in a group that focused on Yuban, which was exclusively roasted and marketed on the west coast. I was dispatched out to the San Leandro plant quite a few times. It was a stone's throw away from Oakland, a few exits down, off the Bay Bridge.

The roastmaster there was an old-school Austrian guy by the name of Horst. The first few times I went out there, he was very stand-offish. Not quite relishing a "Noo Yawkuh" coming out and peering over his shoulder.

It was during my fourth visit there that things took a change. Horst was out sick one afternoon. I was there with the relief roaster. One thing about Horst, he was painstakingly meticulous, a trait not inherent to the relief roaster. As it turned out, a few roasts were pulled and sent to production that I knew were not up to Horst's standards. I informed management back in Hoboken, and they relayed the mandate: Dump into rework!

Horst returned the next morning, and got wind of the previous day's events. He thanked me, took me out for a very intense liquid lunch, then insisted on taking me under his wing. He was operating up to five three-baggers out there, and he not only showed me the nuances of the roast, but how to juggle the workload. This wisdom was heartily accepted and has served me well.

CS: How did you end up in specialty coffee?

MC: I just happened upon the *New York Daily News* Want Ads section one morning in April of '93. Odd thing is, I was not looking for a job, nor did I ever scour the *News'* classifieds, but there was an ad in there for a coffee roaster position at Kobricks Coffee. You just don't see a classified ad for a coffee

continued on page 62

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THE FIRESTARTERS (CONTINUED)

roaster in the *Daily News* every day. I immediately called, and got myself down for the interview. I met with Stuart, Steven and Lee. I was pretty much hired on the spot. The rest, as they say, is history.

The scale-down from Maxwell House took some getting used to. Also, adapting to working for a true family-owned and operated business. What impressed me the most was the pride and dedication that the Kobricks have in their product. A customer is not necessarily buying their goods, they're buying that name, and the rich history associated with it. Tradition passed down through four generations, since 1920. The uncompromising yield to quality, freshness and service is second to none. I'm proud to be a part of that extended family.

CS: What is your favorite part of roasting, and what do you find the most challenging?

MC: My favorite part is guiding the roast during its most critical phase, those precious few seconds where the science, art, passion, knowledge, and raw materials all converge and meld into one singular purpose. I pull every single roast by the judgment of my senses and instinct. No profile or set points are used. Arriving at that flashpoint where all of the elements combine to tell me "pull!" is always special.

What I find most challenging is keeping everything fresh, as in approaching each work day/roast as if it is my first. This also compels me to stay educated regarding trends in the industry, such as the surge in fair trade/Rain Forest Alliance/organic usage and production. It's not as if I can just mosey down to the local bucket o' blood, and tip a few back after a long day with a bar full of roasters (save that for the retreats!); we are a fairly exclusive fraternity. Outlets such as *Roast* magazine, the Roasters Guild, the RG Bulletin Board and the retreats all offer a vast array of knowledge, opinion and expertise from some very dedicated and passionate folks. I fell under the "can't teach an old roaster new tricks" caricature, but I've learned that one must evolve to stay fresh and vital. Mingling with the various roasters at the retreats invigorates me, and I take something valuable away from each chat, class and conversation.

CS: What is your typical roasting day like?

MC: First order of business is going over my green inventory by double-checking the previous day's paperwork. After that, I confer with our production manager, Pedro Texidor, to see what the day's roasting looks like. We have quite a diverse clientele—we fill orders as large as 20,000 pounds and as small as five pounds, custom roasting for each order.

Once we finalize the production schedule, I analyze all of the previous day's roasts. I do an Agrtron on each roast, then brew up a pot of my choice. All of the offerings are cataloged with the Agrtron number and date. This is a way that we stay on top of every roast.

Then it's on to the roasters. An average day sees me doing 10-15 roasts on the 4-bagger, and five to seven on the Diedrich. I pull, cut open, and dump all of the sacks for the Burns roaster, and fill and weigh out each for the Diedrich. I take a six- to eight-ounce sample of each roast. I work alone, and the roaster is situated in the back of the building. Many have referred to it as "the cave."

The Kobricks give me this autonomy and trust. That means quite a lot to know that your employer believes in you that much.

Routine maintenance and cleanings are performed as necessary. An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure with regard to fire, and machine efficiency. I run an automatic clean out every two weeks on the Burns. We also try to cup each new offering sample, and as many in-house varietals as we possibly can. The cupping table is the place to kick the tires on our new blends as well. It's a part of the day that I heartily look forward to.

My day winds up with paperwork, namely entering all of the day's roasts into our system, which deletes the poundage from the green inventory, and puts the roasted poundage into production inventory.

CS: What coffee origins have you visited, or which ones would you most like to visit?

MC: I've yet to visit origin, and it's something I would love to change. I had a very intense two-hour conversation with Paul Katzeff up at Keystone, where he regaled me with some intriguing tales of his visits to origin. My interest had already been piqued prior to that conversation, but after two hours soaking in all that Paul had to say, I was ready. I now think that a roaster should be more intimate with origins, a belief I didn't always hold. But after being exposed to more folks and roasters who impress upon you the enrichment it gives, I'm sold.

Origin I'd most like to visit? Hmm...My favorite cup is Kenya AA, but we had a visit from the great Jackie Robinson's son, Charlie, this past summer. As a primer, I studied up on him, and became quite fascinated with the region of Tanzania he now calls home. I'd like to get myself down there and inhale the peaberry.

CS: What do you feel is the biggest issue facing the coffee industry today?

MC: I think the biggest issue is an age-old one: the welfare of those in the coffee-producing areas. I know that great strides have been made by some extremely benevolent people in our industry to better the conditions, wages and practices. Those folks working the fincas, toiling each day to provide us with this precious raw commodity which sustains us all in so many ways—they are our most valuable resource, and improving their lot is paramount.

CS: How about environmental issues, especially regarding the odor violations being handed out there in New York?

MC: You know, there are one-bedroom condos going up over here starting at \$1.5 million. Back in '97, we had a debate about what to do with our 4-bagger, whether to go with a scrub system or an afterburner because the fine was \$1,500 a week until any odor violation was addressed. I guess the yuppies would rather smell bleach than fresh-roasted coffee. That gentrification is happening everywhere in urban industrial areas.

CS: Tell me your best fire story?

MC: It's not so much the fire, but its aftermath. I traveled quite a bit to California back in my Maxwell House days. I usually stayed

at the same hotels and I struck up a good relationship with a concierge at one in particular. We became fast drinking buddies. Turns out that his fiancé had an uncle in showbiz whose agency handled some pretty high-profile types, including a certain young starlet I was very enamored with. During one trip, the concierge told me that the agent was having a reception/dinner for some of his clients, including HER. I was told that if I could make it down to L.A., I was in.

The shindig was on a Sunday, so I had the free time. I was finishing up my work week, and was slammed by a Friday fire. Turns out the relief roaster slept on the collector can, and it was now ablaze. Well, like two schmucks, we addressed it without cutting the airflow. Once we pulled it out, we were directly hit. I got a full-on blast in the face. I singed my eyebrows, and a nice chunk of my hairline. We finally got the extinguishers on it, and the damage was kept to a minimum. Except that I had to fly down to L.A. and attend said shindig, with penciled-in eyebrows and a black doo-rag. Funny thing is most people down in LaLa land figured I got it from free-basing. Oh yeah and the ingénue never showed..

CS: Thanks Michael. Stay gold, Pony Boy.

MC: Stay gold.

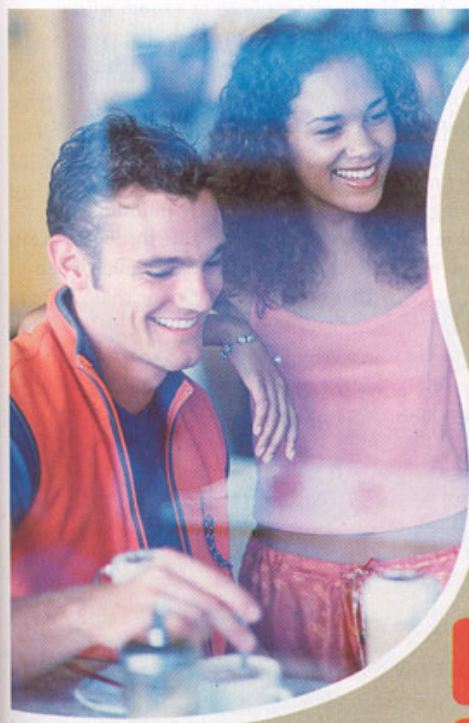
Calabrese's Top Two Roasting Tips

I'll give you one intangible and one tangible:

Tip 1 Approach each roast like it's your first. Getting complacent or succumbing to a rut in production leads to a stagnation of passion. Be willing to learn, let each roast re-educate you.

Tip 2 Also, I've found that overuse of the sample trowel can lead to scorching. At your most critical points it is an invaluable tool, but peeking in too much tends to scorch 'em up.

CHRISTOPHER SCHOOLEY is the roaster and green coffee buyer at Metropolis Coffee Company in Chicago. He drinks his coffee black. Chris and fire go way back. Tell him your fire stories at ceschooley@yahoo.com.



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