

The Right Direction

Compass Coffee uses the latest tools to start their customers' day off right

by ED MCKINLEY

Compass Coffee — a single-location café, roastery and wholesaler — was spawned by a web of coincidence, a passion for java and a penchant for technology.

From the beginning, owners Michael Haft and Harrison Suarez corralled the latest technology for their startup. While building out the space they leased in Washington, D.C.'s trendy Shaw neighborhood, the partners employed three-dimensional modeling tool SketchUp to help turn ideas into reality, from designing the graceful, utilitarian chairs to mapping the layout of the 80-seat, white-oak and raw-steel café, Suarez says.

The two also had access to high-tech tools like a water jet cutter and a laser cutter through TechShop in Arlington, Va., part of a shared-space workshop chain where entrepreneurs can build what they need.

During the six or seven months they worked to convert a former laundromat into Compass Coffee, Haft and Suarez honed their skills as coffee-bean roasters, brewing endless batches in a custom-built San Franciscan Roaster manufactured by Coffee PER, which stands for "processing equipment and repair." The way Suarez explains it, they used the San Franciscan, a tabletop one-pound sample roaster, to "test out different theories and break down the chemistry of the roasting process."

TRADE SECRETS

Learning to roast requires plenty of trial and error, according to Haft.

"There's very little published about roasting, and roasters tend to be secretive," he says. "Now that we've got a



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— Harrison Suarez,
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pretty good handle on it, we don't tell anybody everything."

Only Suarez, Haft and lead roaster Brandon Warner know all of the company's roasting secrets, Haft says.

As the trio learned more, they began roasting beans in a state-of-the-art 75-pound Loring production roaster, Suarez says. The machine, which café-goers can view as they enjoy their coffee, works somewhat like a convection oven that recycles air. That recirculation reduces carbon emissions 85 percent relative to other

roasters and lowers Compass's gas bill, he says.

Haft and Warner have modified the Loring roaster for even better performance, though most changes are filed in the "Top Secret" folder. One improvement Suarez is willing to describe came with the addition of a thermocouple, a sensitive thermometer in a part of the machine where temperature wasn't measured.

Controlling temperature during roasting unlocks the flavors Compass wants in its coffee and guards against



revealing unwanted flavors, Haft says.

“There’s a lot of chemistry, primarily based on the caramelization process. That’s the science of it. The art is deciding [which] flavors we want to unveil.”

The Loring roaster’s logic control system provides the precision and consistency Compass needs to produce the coffee customers have come to expect, Suarez says.

Once Compass roasts a batch of beans in a way that meets its standards, attention turns to repeating the process consistently — an effort aided by computer-controlled instruments that measure and record moisture content, density and other parameters.

“When our customers and our coffee partners order a bag of the Cardinal blend or the Waypoint blend — these are two of our more popular coffees — they can be sure they’re going to get the flavor profile they’ve come to expect,” Haft says.

Coffee is canned in industry-standard 12-ounce containers immediately after roasting, running through a 30-foot conveyor Suarez characterizes as a “custom solution” that automatically weighs the coffee, fills the tins, affixes the tops and pastes on the labels.

It even inserts a card redeemable for a free cup of coffee at the café.

“It was a lot of work to set up, but it’s awesome and we get a lot of compliments,” Suarez says of the canning apparatus.

CREATING RITUAL

Bringing together all that technology represents just one stage of an incredible journey for Haft and Suarez that began with remarkable coincidences.

The two twenty-somethings were born at about the same time in the Washington, D.C., area. They didn’t meet until both attended Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., though they didn’t collaborate there, and each joined the Marines without knowing the other was making the same choice.

They ended up in Officer Candidate School together, and a bond formed when they were studying map-and-compass skills during the storms that dumped up to 30 inches of snow on the Eastern Seaboard during the winter of 2009-2010.

Soon, they were lieutenants commanding platoons in the same battalion 10 miles apart in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province during the summer of 2011, and every couple of weeks they met for coffee and discussion. In war and peace, the U.S. military has run on caffeine, beginning with the Civil War and continuing through today’s conflicts. Suarez and Haft were no exceptions, and they made coffee part of their ritual during those sessions. But it wasn’t the most important factor.

“It wasn’t about the coffee over there,” Suarez says. “It was about who we were getting to share it with, and the time that we would get to spend with that particular person.”

When they got back to the United States after their seven-month deployment, they heard a National Public Radio segment on the coffee renaissance that was following in the footsteps of the craft-beer trend. Given their mutual obsession with coffee,

Suarez and Haft knew they had to find their place in the movement.

While finishing their enlistment, they researched and wrote an e-book called “Perfect Coffee at Home.”

Next came the decision to open a café. Less than a year after Compass Coffee opened, the company offers nine blends of coffee, all based on a flavor matrix of light, medium and dark roasts from the world’s three coffee-growing regions: East Asia, Africa and South and Central America. The company buys some of its beans from importers and is forming relationships with farmers to directly procure beans.

LOCAL TASTES

The café serves pastries from Union Kitchen, a Washington, D.C., food incubator where startups share cooking space. Moral support comes from the Shaw neighborhood’s fellow entrepreneurs, artists and craftspeople. Well-regarded restaurants around the city including Table, Rogue 24 and DGS Delicatessen work with Compass to brew and serve the coffee. Compass Coffee has also reached the shelves of local Whole Foods stores.

Haft and Suarez rely on their Marine training to meet the many challenges that arise in running a business and to lead by example, Suarez says. At every turn, the company has generated publicity: A *Washington Post* series in print and online documented their progress in learning everything needed to start a business — from welding to zoning.

Using coverage in the press to share what they’ve learned provides a way for Suarez and Haft to give back to the community, but their true mission remains creating great coffee and providing a welcoming atmosphere in their café.

“It’s a great place to spend an afternoon or a Sunday morning,” Suarez says. **STORES**

Ed McKinley is a Chicago-based writer and editor.