

## Notes from the 2015 Roasters Guild Retreat

By Steven Lee | photos by Lily Kubota, SCAA

At the end of August 2015, I attended the 15th annual Roasters Guild Retreat in Delavan, Wisconsin. While it was my seventh retreat, it was a special occasion because it was my first time attending as a member of the Roasters Guild Executive Council (RGEC). Being on the council guaranteed this would be a different experience, ensuring that my dance card was full every day.

I helped instruct classes on sample roasting, roasting concepts and green grading. I also assisted in setting up the roasting tent, roasted coffee for opening night, filled in as a roasting tent monitor and all-around question answerer, helped set up and break down cuppings, judged this year's Roastmaster Challenge, and did pretty much anything the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) staff asked of me to make sure the event ran smoothly. I put in a lot of hours, and I had a blast.

I arrived at Lake Lawn Resort on Tuesday, two days before the official start of the retreat. In the roasting tent, gas lines were hooked up and a modular ventilation system was put in place to accommodate the 18 sponsored roasting machines. The next morning, there was still a lot to do. The roasters needed to be hooked up, and I had to roast samples for the competition cupping that would take place the following evening. By late afternoon, the roasting machines were ready and I set in to roasting coffee. Afterward, I rushed to catch a bus that would take a group of us to a tour of host sponsor Probat Burns' manufacturing facility, which was incredible to witness firsthand.

On Thursday evening, the 15th annual Roasters Guild Retreat kicked off with a short opening ceremony that included the introduction of the theme of the Roastmaster Challenge competition: "Sweetness Is My Weakness." The goal of the competition was to create a blend using at least three of the four coffees provided, roasting them in a way that focused on expressing sweetness. The competition coffees were donated by Daterra and represented four different processing methods of a bourbon variety from Brazil: natural, pulped natural, washed and pulped raisin. Eighteen teams of roasters proceeded to cup the four coffees and strategize how to roast and blend them for the competition. The roasting tent was packed until late in the evening



The lakeside location provided an ideal setting for a late summer dinner on the last night of the retreat.

with teams trying to realize the potential in the coffee.

The next day was filled with talks, seminars and more coffee roasting. Representatives from World Coffee Research co-presented a seminar focusing on big-picture topics in our industry—namely coffee genetics, climate change, and the future and sustainability of coffee—followed by a roundtable discussion on gender equality. There was also a seminar and cupping focused on a research study performed by SCAA science manager Emma Sage, with cooperation from Blue Bottle Coffee and Cropster, on the flavor impact of the Maillard browning reaction in coffee roasting. Both of these seminars were meant to inspire discussion and help the roasting community-at-large think about what we, as coffee roasters and buyers, do.

The other part of the day was spent in the roasting tent, logging roasts for the competition. Teams filed in throughout the day, jockeying for position to use their roasters of choice to hammer out that perfect batch of coffee. The atmosphere was tense, with strategies being mapped out and decisions being made. Many of the teams retreated into the cupping rooms to check on their progress throughout the day. During the evening, a team relay race/obstacle course was set up, followed by an all-night karaoke session.

On Saturday morning, I assisted in the RP112: Introduction To Roasting Concepts class, where we discussed the various parts of a coffee roaster and how we, as roasters, can affect the final cup result based on decisions we make during the roasting process. Students got some hands-on experience on a roaster, looking for visual cues and smelling the changes in the coffee as the Maillard reaction began the browning process and as first crack occurred, giving off a distinctive aroma of acetic acid—and making the correlation between what's going on inside the coffee/roaster and what's observable. After roasting three batches, we moved on to the cupping area and tasted the coffees to note any differences in the samples based on the decisions made during roasting.

That afternoon, I was a station instructor for GE151: Green Coffee Grading. In this class, students learned to identify green coffee defects



Roasters Guild Executive Council member Steven Lee at work in the roasting tent.



Two cupping rooms were set up for workshops and for teams to fine-tune their submissions for the Roastmaster Challenge.

and some of the factors that might cause those defects to occur. Each student was given a sample of green coffee that had been “spiked” with defects and was instructed to sort through the beans and identify the defects correctly. It may not be most action-packed class, but it’s an important step in becoming a knowledgeable coffee buyer and can help one develop the ability to offer meaningful feedback to growers and importers.

After the green grading class, I was summoned to help judge the coffee submissions for the Roastmaster Challenge. This year, we used a digital version of the new Roasters Guild Roasted Coffee Evaluation Form, which was developed to focus on the quality of the roast rather than the quality of the green coffee. Present to brew all the submissions on a Curtis Seraphim brewer was none other than Brant Curtis. He worked long and hard brewing samples for the judges, ensuring that each coffee tasted the best it could.

We enlisted our friends at Cropster to help with data collection and score accumulation. The new evaluation form was uploaded to Cropster, and we were able to score digitally and get results and averages instantly. After almost three hours of tasting and comparing notes (our notes as judges and those submitted by competitors to describe their coffees), we decided on a winner: Team 6, The Maillards.

The evening concluded with the announcement of the top teams and the traditional retreat bonfire, overlooking the lake. It was a time for everyone to cut loose and enjoy themselves. For me, the moment afforded an opportunity to reflect upon my place in the industry. I thought about all the old friends and colleagues I see at these events, how much I enjoy their experience and knowledge, and how much I’ve learned from them. I reflected upon all the new people I met this year and how much hope and passion is being brought to the future coffee generation. And I considered how important a sense of community and information sharing is to moving the coffee industry forward while staying firmly rooted in the traditions of the past.

The spirit of collaboration is what first drew me into the Roasters Guild almost 10 years ago, and it is what continues to motivate me. It’s the reason I’ve committed my time and resources as a member of the Roasters Guild Executive Council. Every time I return from the Roasters Guild Retreat, it’s with new friends, a deeper connection to old friends, and a renewed passion for the craft of roasting coffee.



*STEVEN LEE began his coffee career in 1996 as a barista at Peet’s Coffee in the San Francisco Bay Area. After a number of years in training and education for Peet’s, he helped open the roasting and quality control department at Intelligentsia Coffee’s Los Angeles Roasting Works, where he developed his love for the craft of roasting. He is a lead instructor for the SCAA and currently serves as director of coffee quality and education at Groundwork Coffee in Los Angeles, where he spends his days cupping coffee, writing educational programs and figuring out better ways to make coffee brown.*



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