

# Micro Roaster of the YEAR

## BIRD ROCK COFFEE ROASTERS



Bird Rock Coffee Roasters (from left): Tony Gomez, roaster; Joclynn Breeland, manager/quality control; Elke Patton, owner; Chuck Patton, owner.

BY RIVERS JANSSEN

SOMETIMES a few small changes can have an unexpectedly big impact. Chuck Patton learned just how big the first time he cleaned the burners on his Probat L12, which he had recently purchased from another roaster who was exiting the business. “It was my first experience with a bigger roaster, and I didn’t know what I was doing,” Patton explains. “I basically did what the guy before me was doing, and his only variable between the beans he was using was time.”

Cleaning the burners did more than just increase efficiency, however. “At first I thought I had broken something, because all of a sudden I was working with a bonfire using the same settings we’d used before,” he said. “A 15-minute roast was now a 7-minute roast. It really forced us to think about how we were roasting the coffee. In retrospect, it was the best thing we ever did because we basically had to start from scratch and deconstruct our approach.

“Everything we do now is grounded in that one event,” Patton adds. “And it led us to treat each coffee we roast as one of a kind.”

Only a few years removed from this roasting epiphany, Patton’s Bird Rock Coffee Roasters has quickly evolved from a novice operation to one of the most respected artisan roasters in the San Diego region. *Roast*’s Micro Roaster of the Year, Bird Rock maintains a small wholesale business with roughly 20 customers, and puts the rest of its energy into a thriving retail cafe that serves two varietals per day at the main bar plus a decaf, along with four coffees at a small brew bar to the side (using Hario V60s and Chemex).

Bird Rock may be small, but it’s earning plenty of acclaim. “Chuck’s definitely pioneered several different coffee concepts in our region,” says Karen Cebrenos, one of Patton’s earliest green coffee suppliers at Elan Organic Coffees who now works for the Germany-based Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung Foundation. “He was the first guy out of the box to really do some direct trade at the micro level. ... He’s heavily involved in the community. He’s crazy over flavor profiles, cup quality and cupping. He just has genuine coffee passion.”

### A Crash Course in Roasting

A former community college teacher, Patton’s introduction to coffee roasting was gradual. He started with a small home coffee roaster—a gift from his wife Elke—and green beans from Sweet Maria’s. His enthusiasm for the roasting process led to the purchase of a 1-pound air roaster, which he set up in the kitchen of a nearby Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) building. Monday through Friday, Patton would teach at the community college, selling his coffee at local farmers’ markets on weekends.

Eventually Patton moved from the VFW to a kiosk, where he started roasting on a Diedrich IR-3 drum roaster. “I was pretty much self-taught the whole way,” Patton says. “I got a lot of information from Sweet Maria’s, but mostly it was a lot of trial and error. ... When I moved up from the air roaster to the IR-3, I basically roasted using info from the owner’s manual.”

Patton bought the L12 upon deciding to become a full-fledged roaster, taking over the seller’s Miramar-based business and wholesale accounts in the process. He worked in Miramar for the next year before setting up shop in his current location in Bird Rock in 2006.

*continued on page 24*



Shane Voight, assistant manager.



Tony Gomez roasting on the Giesen.

### THE WINNER’S STATS

ESTABLISHED 2002

LOCATION Bird Rock, Calif. (between La Jolla and Pacific Beach in San Diego area)

EMPLOYEES 12

CO-OWNERS Chuck and Elke Patton

RETAIL LOCATIONS 1

ROASTER Giesen 15-kilo

POUNDS PER YEAR 72,000 to 84,000

ROASTING FACILITY 2,200 square feet

WEBSITE [www.birdrockcoffee.com](http://www.birdrockcoffee.com)

Patton's experience provides a blueprint on how an enthusiastic, quality-oriented roaster can succeed in a location with a fledgling coffee culture. With roughly 1,000 homes oriented around main drag La Jolla Boulevard, the city of Bird Rock has never been a retail hot spot. Patton says many in the region used to regard Bird Rock solely as a pass-through between popular beach communities La Jolla and Pacific Beach, although that perception started to change once the city implemented a traffic calming plan a few years back.



Customers at the Bird Rock cafe.

Now the boulevard features several boutiques, restaurants, and other businesses, but it's still not ideal for retail, says Patton.

The one thing the boulevard did have was a Starbucks, a fact that Patton exploited when deciding where to open. He opened his store directly across the street, believing the quality of his coffee and his community engagement would stand out. "Everybody thought he was crazy in our little neighborhood," says Cebreros. "But I stopped by Bird Rock the other day, and the place was crawling. It's supposed to be a secret that no one knows about, but you couldn't get a seat and there was a huge line out the door. And there wasn't a soul in Starbucks."

"It wasn't like we opened from scratch," Patton clarifies, noting that he was active in the Bird Rock community council and had been delivering coffee to people's homes as part of his wholesale business. Still, he took an active role in promoting the business to walk-in customers, roasting the coffee on site and explaining to every customer who walked in what he was trying to do. "We were hoping they would taste the difference in the cup and then start coming back and trying different coffees," he says. "It was really building the business



Joclynn Breeland sample roasting on the 1920s Jabez Burns four-barrel.

on an educational, one-to-one level." The company reinforces this effort through weekly public cuppings and roastery tours, in addition to holding special events.

Patton has also been active in trying to bring the San Diego coffee community closer together. Inspired by the San Diego Brewer's Guild—an organization that promotes the local craft beer scene—Patton organized the SoCal Barista Pour-Over Challenge during San Diego's 2011 Coffee Fest, bringing together eight Southern California roasters and 14 baristas from several cafes to engage in a friendly competition. Each team consisted of two randomly selected baristas,

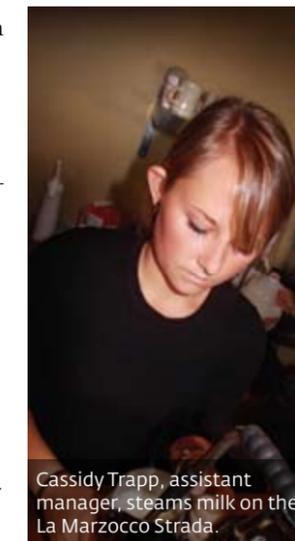


Bird Rock customers and staff celebrating.

who were given one randomly chosen coffee and one of four randomly chosen brew methods: Clever, Chemex, Hario V60 and Aeropress. The teams then had 10 minutes to discuss strategy (such as dose and grind) and present the judging panel with a single brewed serving.

The event was given extra gravitas through the presence of Martin Diedrich, who agreed to serve as a judge. (Diedrich's Kean Coffee in Newport Beach served as a major stylistic influence for Bird Rock's retail store.) Patton is in discussions with La Marzocco USA to hold similar events in the future, with the goal of creating a closer-knit roasting community.

Patton also believes in challenging his own assumptions as a roaster. He initiated a friendly competition between himself, Kansas's PT's Coffee Roasting, and Klatch Coffee from San Dimas, Calif., the latter two Roaster of the Year winners themselves. The roasters submitted roasted samples of a single green coffee to Ken Davids at



Cassidy Trapp, assistant manager, steams milk on the La Marzocco Strada.

*continued on page 26*

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Coffee Review for evaluation and to each other for tasting (Klatch won with a 93 score, versus 92 scores for PT's and Bird Rock).

"It really opened up a feeling of experimentation for us," Patton says. "It just kind of gets you to think about what you're doing. And when you see someone else doing something different with the same coffee, it gets you to question in a good way what you're doing. Maybe I should try a shorter roast or a

longer roast, or maybe I should make that adjustment a little earlier.

"It's easy when you run a business to just start doing the same thing over and over again, because you have so many other things to worry about. But when you give yourself a little wakeup call—hey, there's something else we could be doing here—it's healthy."

Bird Rock gave itself another wakeup

call earlier in the year when it transitioned from its Probat L12 to a Giesen roaster, requiring Patton to once again reevaluate his roast profiles. "The Giesen offers a lot more controllability," says Patton. "We can change the airflow and drum speed, and the cooling times are quicker—about four to five minutes.

"It's really the fun thing for me about roasting," he adds. "Trying one thing, tasting it, trying something different in the next roast, tasting it. I've found it's the best way for me to learn."

### Sustainability and Direct Trade on a Micro Level

It's not easy for a small roaster to start a direct-trade program, but Patton wasn't deterred. When he opened the business, Patton focused exclusively on organic coffees, hoping to demonstrate to consumers that organic coffees can be as good as, or better than, conventionally grown coffees. Over time, however, he came to believe that he was missing out on lots of great coffees, so he expanded his scope (organics now make up roughly 50 percent of his coffees).

He moved into direct trade in 2008, upon a visit to Colombia for his first sourcing trip. "I worked with Virmax, who at the time was promoting a direct-trade program with farmers all over Colombia," Patton explains. "That's when I started to move toward buying from small independent farmers who weren't necessarily certified, but that weren't using weed killers or perhaps were using fertilizer but not pesticides."

From there, Patton has cultivated friendly relationships with importers and exporters who are willing to set aside small quantities of coffee for him. "We aren't big enough to do it 100 percent ourselves," Patton says. "The key for us has been establishing relationships with people who can help us facilitate relationships with farmers or groups of farmers."

Cebreros says Patton's diligence has paid off. "Chuck somehow figured out how to get five bags of the best," she says. "Direct trade at a micro level is a challenge for us greenies. We're always saying, 'You're killing us with this stuff.' But he figured out how to do it." Since 2008,

Bird Rock has forged sustainable direct-trade relationships with farmers in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia.

As a fair-trade supporter, Bird Rock is also looking at ways to support fair-trade co-ops while adding quality incentives outside the Fair Trade USA system. The roaster is currently contracting with a fair-trade co-op in Nicaragua to separate out lots of coffee that cup particularly well. Bird Rock pays the co-op and farmer a higher rate to separate the lots, and then pays a per-pound bonus to the farmer based on how well the coffee scores once it arrives at the roastery. "For example, if the coffee scores an 87, we pay an extra 10 cents a pound," Patton explains. "If it scores 88, we pay 20 cents. If it receives an 89 or 90, we pay a 25-cent bonus."

Patton says his goal is to add a quality incentive to the fair-trade system while giving farmers additional capital for infrastructure improvements.

Although forging sustainable relationships with farmers is the centerpiece of his sustainability efforts, Patton is every bit as enthusiastic about supporting local and global initiatives away from coffee. Patton acted as a liaison with the city while it was building the \$2 million traffic calming project, while also advocating for such local causes and organizations as the MS Walk, the UC San Diego John Moores Cancer Fund, and To Live and Let Live, a local nonprofit for recovering alcoholics in La Jolla's LGBT community. Since 2009, Bird Rock has supported Beyond the Surface, an international nonprofit that helps empower homeless children in Peru, India and South Africa through surfing, and Change the Truth, an orphanage in Uganda that offers educational opportunities for children.

Within the business, Bird Rock uses a GEM electric vehicle to provide emissions-free wholesale deliveries. In early 2011, the company installed a more efficient roaster and afterburner that cut its gas consumption by nearly 15 percent per month while increasing its per-batch capacity. Even small moves have made a big difference, such as installing a hose sprayer in the Bird Rock sink to cut water waste while washing dishes.

### Next Steps

Customers often ask Patton about his plans for expanding the business. For Patton, the question isn't about growth, but about how to ensure that his coffee quality is always high, whether customers buy coffee from wholesale accounts, over the Internet or at a new cafe.

"My whole philosophy has been to

constantly push to evolve and improve bean quality, from source to cup. And part of that focus is customer education," says Patton. "Expanding our footprint in San Diego will require a new paradigm."

Macro Roaster of the Year on page 28



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