

roast



M A G A Z I N E

2015 Macro Roaster of the Year



The staff of Reunion Island Coffee Roasters. | *photo courtesy of Reunion Island Coffee Roasters*

Reunion Island Coffee Roasters

Macro Roaster of the YEAR



Quality Manager Seth Taylor assessing a roast. | photo by Zach Slootsky

THE WINNER'S STATS

ESTABLISHED 1995

LOCATION Oakville, Ontario, Canada

EMPLOYEES 50

LEADERSHIP Peter Pesce, owner; Adam Pesce, director of coffee

RETAIL LOCATIONS Zero

ROASTERS (MACHINES) Loring S-70 Peregrine; Probat 23R

ROASTING OUTPUT 4 million pounds in 2014

WEBSITE www.reunionislandcoffee.com



Adam Pesce with the Perez family at Finca La Soledad in Guatemala. photo courtesy of Reunion Island Coffee Roasters

“But that’s how we’ve always done it.”

To Adam Pesce, those are fighting words. The director of coffee at Reunion Island Coffee Roasters in Ontario, Canada, doesn’t believe in sacred cows when it comes to running the business.

“My mantra right now is to kill our darlings,” Adam says. “We aim to be a progressive and forward-thinking company, from how we source to our sustainability programs to the way we set up production. Everything’s on the table, because that’s how you grow and evolve.”

Fast approaching its 20th anniversary, *Roast*’s 2015 Macro Roaster of the Year has grown and evolved plenty since Adam’s father, specialty coffee veteran Peter Pesce, opened the business in 1995. Once a modest roastery housed in a 3,000-square-foot facility in Mississauga, Ontario, Reunion Island is on track to roast 4 million pounds of coffee this year from its current Oakville location. The company began taking sustainability seriously in 2002 with the purchase of its first fair trade and organic coffees; now Reunion Island is a certified B Corporation, signifying the company’s commitment to meeting rigorous standards for social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.

More recently, the company’s coffee program has undergone its own revolution. Upon purchasing a Loring Smart Roaster in 2013, Reunion Island killed its old darling of a roast style. The company is offering more light roasts than ever, “allowing our coffees to speak for themselves and really shine,” says Adam. Among the coffees benefiting from this are selections from Reunion Island’s new Small Lot Series, a curated monthly collection of micro-lot coffees tailor-made for the Loring. The limited-edition coffees are a departure from Reunion Island’s past lineup of blends and single origins. In Adam’s mind, Reunion Island is entering an exciting new era.

“Things have really changed course over the last couple of years,” he says. “Not so much in the style of company we want to be, but in the way we want to achieve it. We had a very short stint where growth was primary, and it was hard because we were trying to maintain quality rather than improve it. Now we realize that if we do everything we can to improve, the business comes with it. There’s no better sales tool than word of mouth from a really satisfied customer.”

True Pioneers of Coffee

Owner Peter Pesce established himself as a coffee pioneer with the opening of Bourbon Coffee in 1978. One of Canada’s first true specialty roasters, Bourbon was part of coffee’s “second wave” that swept through North America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Peter was near the front of the wave, earning renown as an expert cupper. He eventually served two terms as chairman of the Coffee Association of Canada.

Bourbon proved so successful under Peter’s ownership that he couldn’t help but say yes when Kraft Foods approached with an offer to buy the company in the late 1980s. He worked at Kraft for a time, but missed independence. He opened Reunion Island Coffee Roasters shortly after his non-compete agreement ran out.

Peter Pesce still owns the business, but has taken a less active role in recent years—largely because of his confidence in the company’s current direction. Folks like Adam, Director of Operations Greg Rusciollelli, Quality Manager Seth Taylor, and nearly 50 other coffee aficionados have become a well-functioning team that’s not willing to sit still.

Adam has played a big role in the company's evolution. He was a jack-of-all-trades at first, starting in the quality control lab nine years ago before moving to sales, supplies, and eventually buying and sourcing. Sustainability quickly became his passion.

Reunion Island had already dipped its toe in sustainability with the purchase of its first fair trade and organic coffees in 2002. Adam made buying certified coffees a priority. A full 60 percent of the company's coffees are now Rainforest Alliance-certified, with a number of fair trade and organic coffees also on the menu.

"Pretty much everything we buy is either direct trade, Rainforest Alliance, or fair trade," Adam says. "We've never committed to one model, because we don't believe there's one fix-all that works for every farm. Organic may not work at the top of a 6,000-foot farm at a 60-degree angle, but maybe Rainforest Alliance does. Sometimes the biggest issue is a labor issue, so fair trade makes the most sense."

Once the sustainable coffee program was in place, Reunion Island turned its attention to sustainability at home. In June 2008, Reunion Island became Canada's largest coffee roaster to use 100 percent carbon-free power through Bullfrog Power, Canada's leading renewable energy provider. The company also partners with Trees for the Future, an international agroforestry nonprofit dedicated to restoring rural tree cover in developing countries. For each pound of the company's Sierra Verde coffee sold, Trees for the Future plants two trees in a coffee-producing country. To date, Reunion Island has been responsible for the planting of nearly 320,000 trees in Haiti, Brazil and Tanzania. Reunion Island officially became carbon neutral in late 2013 thanks to its work with Bullfrog and Trees for the Future.

The company's commitment to sustainability culminated in its B Corp certification in 2013. B Corporations must pursue sustainability throughout their supply chains, voluntarily committing to meet high standards for transparency, accountability and performance. It turned out to be a natural fit for Reunion Island.

"As we went through the assessment process, it became apparent that the tremendous amount of work we have done—both abroad and at home—had made more of an impact than we realized," Adam says. "We're 100 percent focused on quality, but

sustainability has also been a real difference maker for us."

Thinking Small

Big may be beautiful, but that doesn't mean it's easily manageable—especially when it comes to sourcing the world's best coffees. According to Adam, one of the ways Reunion Island has kept itself relevant is to think smaller while getting bigger.

"We're always asking ourselves, 'How can we take things that work on a small scale and apply them on a larger scale?'," he explains.

The Loring Smart Roaster was a big step in that direction. Roughly one-third the size of Reunion Island's Probat roasters, the Loring has been fun for Quality Manager Seth Taylor, who's spent countless hours developing new roast profiles for all of the company's single-origin coffees.

"It's really changed everything in terms of our roast style," Adam says. "We were used to the direct heat of the Probats. The Loring has indirect heat. Watching the profiles between the two roasting styles has been a fascinating learning curve."

Reunion Island uses both the Probats and the Loring now, depending on the coffee and the roast level it wants to impart.

"Medium roast coffees seem to taste better on the large roaster, whereas lighter roast coffees seem to taste better on the Loring," says Adam. "It's hard to make a coffee taste great without paying extra attention to it, and the Loring allows us to do that."

Direct trade relationships also have contributed to Reunion Island's "think small" mindset. The Cooperativa de Caficultores del Sur del Tolima (CAFISUR) in Colombia, for example, has supplied coffee to Reunion Island for 10 years. As the relationship has evolved, both sides have started to think less about volume and more about making precise quality improvements.

This year, Reunion Island is partnering with CAFISUR, the Colombia Coffee Growers Federation and local mills to hold a micro-lot competition. Farmers whose cupped coffees receive scores of 85 or higher from the federation are invited to participate and are guaranteed a 10 cent premium just for submitting their coffees. The winners make out even better, receiving a premium of \$1.50, \$1, and 50 cents for finishing first, second, and third, respectively.

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Seth Taylor, barista Josh Tarlo and Adam Pesce at the Central Canadian Barista Competition. *photo courtesy of Reunion Island Coffee Roasters*



Director of Operations Greg Rusciollelli at the cupping table. | *photo by Zach Sloatsky*



photo courtesy of Reunion Island Coffee Roasters



Quality Manager Seth Taylor working on the new Loring S-70. | *photo by Zach Sloatsky*



Adam Pesce at Finca Nejapa in El Salvador. | photo courtesy of Reunion Island



Coffee break at Reunion Island Coffee Roasters. | photo by Zach Sloatsky

Adam says the price premium helps farmers in the short term, but the quality improvements offer lasting benefits.

“Activities like this show farmers that their coffee has real value, and that roasters are willing to pay for it,” he says, noting that the premiums come on top of many of the community improvements Reunion Island has helped fund in the past. “Between us and our importers, we’ve spent \$50,000 in the past decade on things like cupping labs, parabolic drying beds for the coffee, and water and sanitation improvements for the schools in the area.”

Just as importantly, Reunion Island gains access to some super-premium coffees.

“The main lot of coffee is delicious, and we’ve tasted some of the micro-lots they’ve produced in the past,” Adam continues. “We know there’s going to be some special stuff in there. We can’t wait.”

Reunion Island also is investing in the future of coffee quality in the region through its Los Jovenes del Café program. The program aims to keep local youth in coffee farming by purchasing 1-hectare plots of land and seedlings for promising children of coffee growers. The young farmers are trained to plant and care for coffee, and when they

graduate from school, each will have a working plot of land.

“Who’s growing coffee in 20 years will be a huge issue going forward,” Adam says. “Coffee farming at the moment still isn’t economically viable. Unless young farmers have the knowledge and desire to take over from the current group of farmers, the industry will have some real problems.”

Another favorite relationship—both from a coffee and a sustainability perspective—is a project in Papua New Guinea. The remote coffee-growing region is made up of small backyard farms, most of which sell their cherries to roadside collectors. As is typical for such farms, many of the cherries are picked before they’re ripe. Reunion Island, in partnership with Portland Roasting Coffee and Highlands Arabicas, has started arranging roadside auctions for the cherries. The auctions, which include a premium for ripe cherries, are encouraging many of the farmers to pick red as a way of earning more for their coffee—“much to the chagrin of some of the other cherry buyers over there,” Adam says with a laugh.

Aarlie Hull, managing director of Highlands Arabicas, says it’s been win-win so far.

“The price paid to the village growers is 20 to 35 percent higher than what others pay,” he says. “In return, Reunion Island gets unheard-of quality from village farmers.”

Adam describes the trip to Papua New Guinea as grueling but fascinating, much like the coffee.

“It’s such an interesting cup,” he says. “It roasts up super weird, but it’s tastier than all hell.”

Promoting small-lot coffees is a recurring theme in Reunion Island’s direct trade work. Finca La Soledad in Acatenango, Guatemala—a Reunion Island relationship since 2006—has been experimenting with different drying methods and extended fermentation times this year. Reunion Island has prepaid for many of their harvests, providing financial stability for the farm and a potentially premium coffee for the roaster.

“Our small-lot series has been great,” Adam says. “We’re working with cafes now that wouldn’t look at us before because we’re a big roaster, but I’d put our coffee up against any micro roaster anywhere in a blind taste test. I didn’t have that confidence a few years ago, but we’re definitely moving in the right direction.”

Facing the Future

Roasting. Farm relationships. Sustainability. It’s all coming together for Reunion Island Coffee Roasters. Heck, even the company’s branding has a new voice and look that’s more personal and less stodgy than past efforts.

“It’s an exciting time,” Adam says. “We used to say making change in a company of our size shouldn’t be like turning a tugboat around; it should be more like a speedboat. Well, we’re more agile than we’ve ever been.”

“We may have some pain before the gains,” he adds, “but we’re not going to rest on our laurels. We’ll keep challenging ourselves to get better.”



RIVERS JANSSEN is a senior writer and editor for AHA!, a creative communications agency located in Vancouver, Washington, but he still writes about coffee whenever he can. He can be reached via email at riversjanssen@gmail.com.



Newly designed retail packaging. | photo by Zach Sloatsky