

Paul Thornton A Veteran Roaster's Coffee Career

By David Myers

Over the past 10 years, I've witnessed many changes in the specialty coffee industry, culminating with the merger of the American and European trade associations into the Specialty Coffee Association and the Coffee Roasters Guild. I've had the good fortune to work with many longtime Roasters Guild members who have been cornerstones of our volunteer community, and who have defied the odds to craft decades-long careers in coffee. In this issue and the next, we'll focus on two leaders who have helped guide our formerly separate organizations—Paul Thornton from the heritage Roasters Guild, and Sonja Grant from the heritage Roaster Guild of Europe—who will share their perspectives on their careers in coffee and what the future holds.



Paul Thornton at the roaster, 2015. | Photo courtesy of Paul Thornton



From left: Chris Verhaalen, Rachel Thornton Verhaalen and Paul Thornton at the Thornton Family Coffee Roasters roasting plant in Beaverton, Oregon, 2018. | Photo by Lily Kubota

David Myers: You started roasting more than 35 years ago. Can you give us a sense of what your career has included?

Paul Thornton: I started roasting coffee in 1982 for a small roastery in Portland, Oregon, called Coffee Bean International. At the time, we owned a retail brand called Coffee People and had a small wholesale operation. My job was to buy green, roast, and develop new blends and roast profiles—basically, to manage green and roasted coffee until it was used at a coffee shop. As the company grew, my job expanded to making sure we had the equipment and people we needed, and to buying the green we needed and roasting it to fill orders on time.

I left that company in December 2015. By that time, I had gone through three acquisitions and moved our operations twice. When I started, we were in a 10,000-square-foot space roasting 80,000 pounds a year on a 1955 belt-driven, one-bag Probat. When I left, we were roasting well over 50 million pounds at three different roasting sites using more than eight roasters, from half baggers to four-bag Probats.

I quit that job to start my own wholesale roasting company with my daughter Rachel and her husband, Chris Verhaalen. It's called Thornton Family Coffee Roasters. We're located in Beaverton, Oregon, just west of Portland. We live on this side of town, but we weren't seeing specialty roasters here. We're planning on turning this town into a destination for phenomenal coffee with the help of some of our local friends who have specialty shops in the neighborhood.

DM: Can you give us a sense of the roasting style you used early in your career?

PT: I'm pretty sure the term "shoot from the hip" was invented during the '80s micro-coffee-roasting scene. It was frickin' nuts—the start of the specialty coffee industry and the start of consumers wanting better coffees. This was before cellphones, the internet, digital thermometers, fax machines, any sort of profile recording



Antigua, Guatemala, 1990. | Photo courtesy of Paul Thornton



LEFT With Charles Weber (left), operating a home-built roaster on the beach at a Northwest Regional Roasters event in Arcata, California, 2006. **RIGHT** Paul Thornton at the Coffee Bean International roasting plant, 1988. | Photos courtesy of Paul Thornton

systems, and before roasters knew that if you didn't clean your machines, they would self-clean. (Fires did a lot of cleaning, made a lot of mess, and did a lot of damage—not worth it!)

My style, though, was the same as it is today. I'm still approaching coffee as an agricultural product that changes over the year. I still approach coffee roasting at the specialty level as a craft that requires human senses to adjust to agricultural changes in the raw product. Profiles need to change to accommodate changes in water activity from evaporation. This requires roasting and cupping daily to recognize changes in green over the course of the year.

DM: When did you know coffee would become your career?

PT: The first time I went to a coffee origin. That was in 1989. I went to Guatemala. I wrote letters to a coffee farm owner by the name of Thomas Olivera in Antigua. Snail mail was the only way to communicate, so it took months to plan. I remember the drive taking nearly five hours from Guatemala City on a two-lane road. I had been roasting for about seven years and thought I knew everything about coffee. I learned

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that I didn't know shit about coffee. I learned that most of the effort toward phenomenal coffee happens at origin, before it even gets to me. I also learned that working directly with growers while hiring importers to move what we bought was something I wanted to do. So I did. Direct relationships between growers and small specialty roasters started

to be more common. Since then, I've been to origin more than 200 times. I learn every day. I still feel like I know a fraction of what there is to know about coffee. But if I stay humble and listen to what the youngest and newest people in the industry are talking about, I'll keep learning. When I stop listening, I'll stop learning.

DM: Why start your own company at this point in your career?

PT: I'm a coffee guy—hands-on roasting, cupping, experimenting, toying around. I have a serious side, but I also love having fun, and I have fun doing what I like most. I'm not a fan of sitting in meetings, and I wanted to maintain a craft that needs ongoing practice. I was being pulled from what I love into the corporate model, and I needed change.

In the meantime, my daughter Rachel and her husband, Chris, had been working in Kona, Hawaii, for one of the largest Kona producers. They picked, pulped, fermented, dried, milled, roasted and operated retail. Rachel has a massive amount of barista and shop management experience, and Chris has a large amount of coffee experience and is a skilled roaster. It was time to pull the plug, quit the corporate job, sell our shit and buy what we needed to start our own company.

DM: Volunteering is also a big part of your story. What drives you to continue volunteering after so many years?

PT: The desire to learn, participate and be part of coffee's evolution. The coffee industry is constantly evolving. Tools, controls, ideas, variations in coffee, experimentation, new equipment with controls that may not have existed a few years ago are being tested and used in mainstream coffee. Like any industry that has constant improvements, people within it must keep up or be left behind. Volunteering is my college. It teaches me about the newest things. It gives me a chance to be part of the evolution. It introduces me to people I learn from and gives me a chance to address career challenges through dialogue and engagement with other personalities in this same industry.

As an example, in the mid 1990s, through volunteering, I was lucky enough to run into people like Mike Ebert, Peter Giuliano, Shawn Hamilton, Spencer Turer, Geoff Watts—all coffee roasters and green buyers, and all asking the same question: How do we learn

more? This little team worked together for a number of years, with a number of other personalities, to design a model that eventually became the Roasters Guild. I was on the Roasters Guild Executive Council for eight years. In 2009, I was on the Specialty Coffee Association of American [SCAA, now SCA] Board of Directors, and in 2014, I was SCAA president, managing the beginning steps of a potential merger with the Speciality Coffee Association of Europe, of which I was and still am a huge supporter.

DM: What was sourcing like when you started, and what coffees were available?

PT: It was easy: Call an importer, get samples, cup them, approve them and have them shipped to my warehouse. Eventually, though, my interest in knowing our supply chain got the better of me. The challenge was that the vast majority of importers in the '80s didn't want to share detailed information about their supply chains, for fear of roasters going around them. But the reality was, buyers like me needed importers. I didn't know how to import, and I didn't want to know. Importers have since learned that the more details they can share about their supply chains, the more their customers want to work with them.

DM: Do you have advice for roasters just starting their careers?

PT: Get involved with your coffee community, stay engaged with regional and global coffee associations, and be humble to increase your chances of learning. Take the time to reach out to others who are part of the craft of coffee, and offer your help if you're able.

The most important message I'd like to share is that traveling to origin is an opportunity to learn and celebrate relationships, but you should have specific purposes for being there. You are at work. Define why you're traveling before you go, and share what you learned when you get back. Look for humanitarian issues; talk to the workers, including pickers and floor sweepers,

and ask them about their work conditions. Cup coffee, but never buy coffee on a whim at origin; it's easy to become emotional because of the ambiance, and that's when poor decisions are made. Ask yourself why you're going, what you plan to accomplish, and how this travel supports the company's mission, vision and overall success.

DAVID MYERS is chair of the Membership Committee for the Coffee Roasters Guild. He was vice chair of the Membership and Communication Committee and served on the Education Committee for the heritage Roasters Guild.

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