

Sonja Björk Grant

Building a Career in Coffee

By David Myers

Sonja Björk Grant is a leader in the international coffee scene. As a roaster, barista trainer, and developer of world coffee competitions, she has been a champion of bringing the coffee community together to share knowledge. Most recently, she led the heritage Roaster Guild of Europe, and last year she transitioned to her new role as chairwoman of the international Coffee Roasters Guild. Let's find out more about Grant's career in coffee and her thoughts on what the future holds.



Photo by Guðbjörg Gissurardóttir

David Myers: How did you get your start in coffee? Did you have any mentors?

Sonja Björk Grant: In Iceland, coffee is a big part of our culture, and I was always very much interested in the beverage. My grandmother taught me how to brew coffee with an old Melitta filter and a thermos. In those days, paper was just starting to take over the fabric filter.

I moved to Reykjavík at 17 and started to study carpentry. At one point, I was tired of working outside all day in tall buildings and wanted to change my direction in life. I started working in coffee in 1995 with the first specialty roastery in Iceland, Kaffitár. It was run by a woman, Aðalheiður Héðinsdóttir, who still owns the business today. She had just opened her first coffee bar and I was lucky to be hired as a barista. We worked side by side for 13 years. She has been my mentor in many areas of life, and also introduced me to the specialty coffee associations of America and Europe (SCAA and SCAE), showing me the importance of being a part of a community.

In 2008, I started my own roasting company and cafe called Kaffismiðja Íslands (when I sold it 2013, the name was changed to Reykjavík Roasters). I roasted on one of the first machines that Giesen produced—a pink 6-kg. Giesen.

DM: Reykjavík seems like a relatively isolated market for connecting with the coffee community. How did you forge relationships with so many coffee people in Europe and the rest of the world?

SBG: It started with going to events and visiting other companies in nearby countries. Iceland is lucky to be located between the U.S. and Europe, and a popular stop for connecting flights.

My first SCAA conference was in Philadelphia in 1998. I have tried to attend as many of them as possible in the time since then, volunteering in seminars and hands-on workshops. After the U.S. began organizing championships in 2001, I helped with judges' calibration and judged alongside them for the first few years.

I have been actively involved in developing several events that have made networking easier. Nordic Barista Cup, created in

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2004, was a team event with five Nordic countries participating that included two days of workshops and educational lectures. The event was sold out for 10 years in a row and brought the professional coffee world closer, and to a higher level. In 2000, I helped create the World Barista Championship (WBC) and, after

that, even more challenges began to pop up. I was training judges around the globe, helping national bodies to organize events, and helping baristas to develop their skills.

Iceland is very well located, but it is very expensive and the shortest flight to the mainland is around three hours. Over the past 10 years, social media has changed how networking works and provided more opportunities to connect with the community.

DM: When did you first get involved in competitions and how did you decide to devote your talents to becoming a world-class judge?

SBG: I do not think this was planned. I like challenges, and to innovate and create. The judging experience provided the opportunity to have fun and get to know people.

Since I was a child, I have been involved with all kinds of competitions, both as a competitor and as a judge. I used to judge in championships for Icelandic horses, after I stopped competing at age 17. I was involved in creating the Barista, Latte Art, and Coffee in Good Spirits Championships, and was excited to be a part of this effort. Some of the rules used in the coffee championships came from horseback riding, along with other championships that had nothing to do with coffee.

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Once I started working in coffee, my ambitions changed to searching for better quality in the product and a wider education—finding any way I could to be more professional as a barista and getting more knowledge. I was limited to few books, experimenting in the coffee roastery, and working with a small group of baristas to understand how coffee worked. When the coffee championships came along, the education got more inspiring. It created some standards around the technical work of the barista, and they were more visible and the opportunities for networking grew. The championships became a great training tool and provided new challenges. Along with several colleagues, I started helping other national bodies organize championships of their own and started training judges for national level to prepare them for the world level.

DM: You are now the chair of the newly unified Coffee Roasters Guild, having previously been chair of the Roasters Guild of Europe. What do you plan to focus on for the next year and what hopes do you have for our great roasting community?

SBG: This is a big question that will have a complex answer. After the unification of the two guilds in 2018, the year was full of challenges, with a focus on rebuilding unified committees and running existing events. Strong history and heritage were the guidelines, giving the unified guild strength to create new goals that would serve the wider roasting community. We can be really proud of the work that has been done. It wasn't easy, by any means, but we made it and our future is strong and bright. We will continue to organize inspiring events in different parts of the world that bring our community closer together.

The CRG committees are full of diverse coffee professionals with exciting agendas. We are focused on creating opportunities to share knowledge so that nobody is left behind. We will continue to explore research content in cooperation with SCA, and we have started to get involved with World Coffee Events (WCE), and the World Coffee Roasting Championship. Our current events such as origin trips, CRG Retreat, CRG Camp, and Sensory Summit will continue to take place in 2019. We are also very excited about the CRG Member Driven Events that have been popping up in different parts of our community. Events like these are so valuable for sharing knowledge and getting inspired. Our roasting community is fun and engaging—I'm proud and honored to be part of it.

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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