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Moving Beyond Tea's Wellness Message

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Blending is one of specialty coffee's original arts. Part of the excitement around sourcing better coffee in the second wave was the ability to roast it well and build a reputation on the consistent quality of new household names. The third wave arrived with a rush of single origins and blends took a backseat. Now, blends are returning to the forefront as specialty coffee returns to its roots, building blends that complement single origins for a complete and balanced coffee menu.

By Rachel Northrop

Emeryville, California-based Peet's Coffee is a major player in the specialty coffee retail sector. Its coffee selection includes both single origin coffees and blends, including the Big Bang, a medium roast blend that features fruitiness from natural processed Ethiopian coffee and brightness from washed processed coffees from Latin America. "The name nods to how some have described Alfred Peet as the "big bang" of craft coffee—the one who started it all," Doug Welsh, roast master for Peet's told *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*. "When he set up shop in Berkeley in 1966, he transformed America's expectations of the depth, body, and flavour in our cups."

One unexpected outgrowth of the explosion of single origin specialty coffee is the creation of coffee growing celebrities, producers whose





name-recognition inspires awe among industry peers for the scarcity and novelty of their coffee more than it inspires enthusiasm among coffee customers. The blend, on the other hand, is all about the customers. Blends are often named for bits of company history or the names of neighbourhoods and local landmarks.

Along with Big Bang, Peet's other most popular blend is Major Dickason. "Inspired by one of the first 'Peetniks' and refined by Alfred Peet, this premier dark roast blend is our all-time best seller," said Welsh. Blends appeal to a wide customer base and remain popular over time.

Rich Nieto, founding roaster of Sweetleaf Coffee in Brooklyn, New York, also finds blends to be customer-centric. "The roasting competition at the 2019 New York Coffee Festival asked us to create a blend that represents a community, so we created the 7 Line blend to represent the 7 train in Queens. Everyone loved it," said Nieto. "Even if people weren't from Queens they felt represented in the blend, which included coffees from Africa, Latin America and Sumatra." The 7 Line blend was so popular Sweetleaf decided to incorporate it into its menu.

Blends are inclusive and customers identify with their accessibility. Each single origin offering appeals to different customers – acidic Central American coffees for one palate, earthy Sulawesi for another – but blends are crafted to satisfy a wider audience. Mark Howell, vp of green coffee with Baton Rouge, Louisiana-based Community Coffee said, "We consider a wide variety of factors, and the consumer plays a huge role in helping us evolve our portfolio. Once we determine a general blend profile, we then go out and look for those high-quality beans that would get us there. In the case of Private Reserve specifically, we are looking for coffees that would qualify as specialty coffee under the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) grading criteria for both physical and cup."

Third wave roasters cut their teeth building a niche of customers excited about the outer limits of coffee's flavour, from Geishas lighter than floral tea to coffees as savoury and spicy as pasta sauce, but as specialty coffee businesses grow in volume and in maturity, they are sourcing coffees for the whole family, building welcoming blends into their menus as complements to striking single origins.

Consistency to Limited Time Offer

Allie Caran is the director of coffee education at roaster-retailer Partners Coffee in Brooklyn, New York. "The first beautiful aspect of blends is the consistency they bring to your menu. You can create unique profiles and continuously offer singular flavour flagships that can be celebrated year-round."

Consistency is one attribute commonly associated with blends, and this reliability provides balance to the variability among single origin coffees. "Coffee can taste like just about anything, and a single origin menu is how we communicate our own excitement over the possibilities of flavour," said Caran. "We believe that blends can be the easiest way to get people to care about specialty coffee."

Blends can be the way in, the cup of coffee that keeps a customer coming back. According to Nieto at Sweetleaf, blends are "something to give your customers that they come in and like and can get again and again." With regard to supplying wholesale coffee to new cafés, he noted that "cafés want to build a loyal base to start a business. Customers know that the next day [the coffee they like] is there. The next week, it's there."

Consistency for customers and for wholesale clients is a key benefit of blending. "Sweetleaf introduced two

(Left) Sweetleaf Coffee's 7 Line Blend is named for the 7 train in Queens, NY.

(Below) Community Coffee's Private Reserve blends such as Evangeline meet SCA specialty coffee grading standards.





Peet's 2019 Vine & Walnut Blend is a seasonal fall offering. The Holiday Blend is also a limited edition seasonal blend.

more blends to meet the needs of wholesale customers,” said Nieto. “Just because Sweetleaf’s cafés are focused on single origin coffees doesn’t mean our [wholesale] customers want the same thing. We have a different client base than restaurants. Customers come into a café looking for specialty coffee.”

Blends cover lots of territory within specialty coffee, from being a tool for consistency to deliver reliably crowd-pleasing coffee to restaurant wholesale accounts to being the way into specialty coffee for curious café customers. Blends can also be a limited time offer to highlight a particular flavour profile, parallel to what single origins offer. Welsh noted Peet’s 2019 Vine & Walnut as a seasonal fall limited offering and Ethiopian Super Natural as a seasonal winter limited offering, both sold only at their coffee bars or online store.

“With each sip of a Peet’s Single Origin, consumers enjoy a true expression of that specific region — like the black currant flavour of Kenya or the jasmine-like aroma of Ethiopia. Each cup is truly evocative of where it is grown and produced,” said Welsh. Offering a blend and a single origin as equally special limited offerings shows that neither is inherently superior. “By ensuring a breadth of high-quality offerings across segments, we are able to meet the range of taste preferences of coffee drinkers.”

Building the blend starts with the coffees sourced. Of Peet’s sourcing, Welsh said, “we are very selective about the beans we purchase,

sourcing from the top one percent of the market and verifying how they are grown. We bring together coffees that could each stand on its own.”

Community Coffee sees blends as a perfect combination of coffees that appeal to a particular flavour profile and create something unique but balanced, while single origins are sourced to respect the unique terroir of a particular coffee. According to Howell, “We balance our portfolio with Private Reserve specialty-level [blends] coffees from all over the world. Single origin is a way to honour a specific origin, region, community or farm. It’s about telling the story of the farmer and region through its unique flavour.”

Smart Sourcing

Blended coffee is consumed as one, but its components might be sourced on opposite sides of the world. Jonathan Withers is the green coffee buyer at Partners Coffee and knows that coffee purchasing must begin with the end in mind, considering both single origin offerings and blend components. “Not only are we trying to find the best microlots in the world, but we are doing so vertically so that the same people who grow these microlots are also supplying us with the coffees that we use in the blends,” he said.

Partners considers the seasonality of coffee in its sourcing plan. “Building a thoughtful and fully integrated program for both blends and single origins allows us to encompass the entirety of the coffee without challenging the inherent issues that come with coffee as a live, organic and fleeting product,” said Withers. Partners started their blending program as a response to what coffee buying could be. “To be able to buy someone’s entire specialty farm output gives us better access to coffee, stronger relationships, and complete transparency,” Withers explained.

As specialty coffee producers and exporters become more familiar with the tastes of both niche and broader market coffee drinkers, they offer special stand-out microlots while also producing coffee that meets the requirements to become a specialty blend component. Many parts of today’s specialty coffee menus can be sourced from the same farms.

Blends also require teamwork across company departments. “Developing blends is a dance between what the consumer wants and what story/flavour we want them to experience,” explained Community’s Howell. “Ultimately,



Many of Partners' blends have names of areas in New York. Flavour notes are displayed on the front packaging like the single origin coffees.

it's a team effort between marketing, sales, operations, supply chain, the farmer and the consumer."

Perfecting the Recipe

Each roasting outfit perfects the art of its blends over time. It helps to start with the right ingredients, but without putting them on a pedestal. "No coffee is too good to blend," reminded Welsh. "That's a principle Alfred Peet lived by and one still carried on by the company to this day. Blending is fundamentally about adding one great aroma, flavour or texture to another. Body from a syrupy thick Sumatra, bright bittersweet chocolate from a Guatemala, juiciness from a Kenya AA. In this way, one can experience more in a blend than in a single origin."

Great coffees mutually reinforce each other in a carefully crafted specialty coffee blend. Of Sweetleaf's espresso blend for its coffeehouses, Nieto said, "we approach our espresso blend 50/50: sweet, low flavour tones like maple, milk, chocolate, or cocoa then something sweet to layer on top of it. I love jam, but I need some base to put the jam on."

Creating and maintaining a specialty coffee blend is an opportunity to play with flavour, to fit the taste jigsaw together to reveal a new work of art in the cup. "A beautiful coffee with nice acidity pairs well with something with a lower bass. It's very important for our espresso blend to also play well with milk," noted Nieto.

At Community, blends are all about how the parts create a greater whole. "We look at the individual coffees and their characteristics, and how to combine them appropriately to build flavour into a final unique combination. We look at attributes like acidity, body, flavour and finish," noted Howell.



Getting back to the idea of blends having personality and reflecting both the story of the company and the story of its customers, that personality can be apparent in the blend recipe as well as the name. "Over the years, Major Dickason's blend has become the coffee that epitomizes Peet's: rich, smooth and complex, with a full body and multi-layered character," said Welsh.

"We're understandably coy about the specific ingredients of this, our most famous blend, but customers know it well as combining the sparkling notes of high altitude Central American growths with the body and satisfying finish of the Indo-Pacific." Like most hard work, blends appear effortless, full of balance and flavour that customers recognize and return to. As specialty coffee evolves, blends are poised to be an ever-more meaningful part of the industry's future. ■

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