

Organic coffee – from the grind up

WHY PEOPLE ARE DEMANDING MORE FROM THEIR CUP

» By Jaime Newborn

As a food category organic coffee is an interesting phenomenon. Passionate drinkers of the 'everyday indulgence' have an intense interest not just in the flavour of their daily cup, but its origins. By all reports consumers do not want to sip a 'straight up' commodity.

And with coffee reputed to be one of the most traded products in the world (second only to oil) they can demand choice. Reportedly the livelihoods of more than 125 million people depend on growing coffee; and in some of the world's least developed countries exports of coffee can account for over 80% of foreign exchange earnings.

By seeking Fairtrade and organic blends, consumers have voiced their disapproval of low returns and poor working conditions for farmers which have been associated with coffee in the past. They have also introduced a new term into the coffee vernacular – FTO (Fairtrade, Organic).

Given that FTO coffee – unlike many other organic food lines – can sell for a price on-par with a non-organic cup, it seems consumers would have little reason not to switch to ethically produced and chemical free coffee.

But is this theory holding true in the market place?

Josh Symons, marketing manager of **Coffex Coffee Pty Ltd**, says it is.

Ground coffee from Coffex's double certified Fairtrade and organic brand Global Café Direct is now a regular item on the shelves of Coles supermarkets.

Mr. Symons says the response has been nothing short of amazing.

In the last quarter (to 20/09/09), our Global Café Direct decaffeinated certified organic and Fairtrade coffee sold more than any other decaffeinated coffee in Coles, he says, noting this includes the entire pure coffee category.

"The category for Fairtrade and certified organic coffee is growing – value for money determines food purchase decisions. If we can offer product the same size and price as other commercial brands, and also provide a product that is ethical, sustainable, and tastes great we are undoubtedly better value," he says.

Wells Trenfield, owner of **Jasper Coffee** agrees more people than ever are buying ethical coffee.



Wells Trenfield, Jasper Coffee, on the search trail for coffee in New Guinea.

"We began our coffee business in Melbourne in 1989 and aligned with organic values quite early. I had been growing large plots of organic vegetables as long as thirty years ago and was very aware of the benefits of organic and biodynamic production."

The company sourced its first organic coffee from the remote highlands of New Guinea and has not looked back since.

"There has been a fundamental shift in consumer thinking over the last five years. Organic product is now recognised as mainstream, acceptable and desirable, a great thing given the scepticism we have seen as an 'organic company' in the past," says Wells.

Jasper Coffee was a founding member of Fairtrade and the first company in Australia to receive its Fairtrade licence in 2003.

Wells says Fairtrade and certified organic "mesh beautifully".

"Fairtrade and organic are not synonymous, but the double certification accounts for the large part of an important sustainability message. This covers not just the environment, but also economic and social sustainability - especially when saddled with our carbon neutral certification."

Wells oversaw the laborious task of obtaining Jasper Coffee's third accreditation

– carbon neutral certification– in March this year.

"We are the first coffee company in Australia to have achieved this milestone," he says.

"We took the question 'where does my coffee come from?' one step further, to find out what kind of environmental impact was involved.

Calculating the business's carbon footprint involved gaining accurate measurements of energy, gas, and water use, looking at everything from packaging to the transport mode used by employees to get to work.

"In other words, our whole company is accredited carbon neutral," says Wells.

"It was a learning process, that's for sure! When we started, we really didn't know what it meant. Currently, we offset our carbon but - most importantly - we now have on-hand the information to take the next step towards more efficient

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business practises."

He says he believes the initial cost of triple certification will be outweighed by future benefits. "I wanted to get to the point where no-one could doubt our genuine interest in ethical production."

Toby Smith, owner of **Toby's Estate** (premium coffee roasters and beverage distributors) agrees certification helps show consumers a company is serious. He says for his business, providing a fair deal for primary producers is a major focus.

"We're a speciality business in that we import high quality and often niche products from distinct areas and origins. We offer coffee from single estates or small micro-lots from round the world, including farms in Indonesia, East Timor, Africa, and Central and South America.

"For our growers a relationship with us means the return of a fair price, not a commodity price. We don't want farmers to be affected by slumps in a world price, because that's not sustainable for anyone."

He says, like wine, consumers tend to look more closely at the origins of coffee.

"We have a strong following of people interested in origin coffee and terroir (the specific profile and characteristics of something grown in a particular environment and area). We roast our coffees separately depending on their region, before creating blends."

He says Toby's Estate has grown in line with the rising demand for both organic and fairly traded products but notes one of the best ways to maintain quality and traceability is to visit the source personally.

"Organic product is now recognised as mainstream, acceptable and desirable, a great thing given the scepticism we have seen as an 'organic company' in the past."

"Certified organic makes up around 40% of our business. We have recently gone on an extensive search for new suppliers to satisfy demand. There's no shortage of coffee growers, it's just a matter of finding those who match our needs and values."

He says 'certified organic' is not always a reality given the remoteness of some production origins.

Closer to home, Australian producers of certified organic green beans can be harder to find.

They are found however, in the rolling countryside of Alstonville (near Byron Bay, NSW) where Phil and Lynne Kreutzer have established **Hightrees Estate Coffee**, a premium Australian owned organic coffee growing and roasting business.

Both hailing from former backgrounds as lawyers, Phil says growing certified organic coffee Down Under has not proven too hard – quite the opposite.

"The conditions and climate of our region certainly help – we based our decision to grow coffee on location when we were considering various crops ten years ago. Our farm is located on rich, red volcanic topsoil (measured to a depth of 100m). Our coffee thrives!"

He says they saw opportunity for organic coffee in Australia because "there

was a gap in the market for coffee grown locally, with most imported" and because coffee was a robust crop which naturally required minimal spraying and attention.

"Lynne attended a permaculture and sustainable farming course and we talked to best-practice farmers in the area to see what worked and what didn't – then we planted 10,000 trees!" says Phil.

He says from the start, their product was well received by retailers.

"Currently demand for our coffee outweighs what we are able to physically produce."

The business took the extra step to become a roaster and processor in 2002 because "there was a fair difference in the price we could get for a roasted bean compared to what we could get from a green bean," says Phil.

"In addition, we can now control the quality of our product right to the hands of the consumer and offer a coffee with a flavour unique to our part of Australia."

Hightrees Estate Coffee has since won regular awards at the Sydney Fine Food show (including espresso show Champion in 2007), and Phil says a wide range of people enjoy sampling local beans.

"The quality is very high – we only process our beans by sun drying (as opposed to machine drying) which I think has a big effect on the resulting flavour."

Phil says the popularity of certified organic and fair trade coffee, whether from Ethiopia or Australia is seeing deserved growth.

Processors have also diversified into other areas of opportunity. Jasper Coffee and Toby's Estate provide certified organic tea; Jasper, Toby's Estate and Coffex have launched into organic & Fairtrade hot drinking chocolate; and Jasper Coffee added certified organic and Fairtrade sugar sticks and instant coffee to its range two years ago – all signs the coffee industry is undergoing seriously sustainable change.

As Toby points out – "Consumers are looking for alternatives".

"We are helping a growing number of conscientious consumers take the next step to a more traceable cup."

For more information visit:
Global Café Direct www.globalcafedirect.com.au; Jasper Coffee www.jaspercoffee.com; Toby's Estate Coffee www.tobysesstate.com.au; Hightrees Estate Coffee www.hightreesestate.com.au

Toby Smith of Toby's Estate, visiting a coffee plantation in Indonesia.

