

SPOTLIGHT:



“What is unique about his approach is that he got the business going **FULL SPEED** before opening the doors.”



Noble Coffee, Ashland, Ore.

by James Di Properzio

Jared Rennie didn't take the usual path to opening a café and roastery. A high school Spanish teacher for eight years, Rennie found his interest in coffee went beyond finding the best beans and brewing methods. He wanted to roast his own beans, learn about the science behind what makes specialty coffee so good and so diverse, and source his own green coffee. During college he worked at a coffee shop, helping customers from behind the espresso bar and roasting on a fluid-bed air roaster. After earning a master's degree and teaching Spanish for a couple years, he bought a Rancilio Silvia espresso machine and a small roaster and began experimenting at home. He would give his home-roasted coffee to friends, who were often enthusiastic. Rennie eventually decided he couldn't do what he wanted to do with roast profiles without a professional roaster, and he couldn't roast in that vol-

ume without starting to sell the beans, so he took the plunge and installed a full-scale unit in his garage in Talent, Ore.

When Rennie got serious about coffee, Southern Oregon was lagging behind coffee Meccas like Portland, and he couldn't find a cup he thought was worth drinking. He took a whole-systems approach, and after fiendishly studying every aspect of the coffee process from source to roast to brewing equipment to technique, he realized that most places that made coffee locally could do much better even with what they already had. He got trained as a La Marzocco technician and realized he could do more than just sell beans to cafés and restaurants—he could calibrate their machines, adjust the temperature and process, and train their staff in the art of espresso. Soon he started making rounds at local businesses with this pitch: Let me go behind your bar and use your

beans and equipment, and I'll brew you a cup of coffee so much better you won't even recognize it. That's the service that comes with buying his beans—you get the whole process perfected, from bean to cup. Rennie was essentially selling his beans without even needing to bring them along. In the course of these visits, the majority of businesses decided to switch. One restaurant owner I spoke with who did not go with Noble told me that switching would have been a no-brainer, a perfect fit, and only the 12-year relationship with his previous supplier kept him from making the change. When I mentioned it to Rennie a few weeks later, he grinned. "They switched last week," he said.

By this time, Rennie had found two very important partners: Caleb Peterson and Steve Sacks. Peterson was a barista and trainer who did training for another retailer in town, shuttling up to Stumptown in Portland for advanced training himself. Stacks is a well-established businessman who has run local restaurants for 30 years. Rennie refers to the ownership as being among three couples because each of their wives has been crucial in supporting Noble Coffee. Steve and Kelly Sacks have both worked at least part-time on getting the café ready. "Kelly is a huge part of the business," explains Rennie. Peterson's wife, Libby, works full-time at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival but has been taking orders and meeting customers. Rennie's wife, Carolyn, is still teaching Spanish full-time, "but she's been the one at the kitchen counter with me, late at night, packing beans," Rennie says.

Though the six of them have been integral in assembling Noble Coffee, it's Peterson and Rennie who are at the space all day, every day. "What we're doing is not innovative in the industry—but in Southern Oregon it is," says Peterson. "This is a barista-style café: roasting is done by a barista, sourcing is done by a barista; our hands are on everything from sample cupping and quality control to roasting, and that shows in the final product." Rennie adds, "It's the same with our wholesale accounts: We don't drop off the beans and say, 'Good luck with those!' We service and educate through every stage of the process."

Rennie knew all along that he wanted to open a café-roastery, but what is unique about his approach is that he got the business going full speed *before* opening the doors. Having built a clientele of home-delivery bean customers through word-of-mouth over two years, and acquiring many area restaurants and cafés as clients for bean sales and service, his brand had become one of the most prevalent in the area, even without a physical location (other than his garage, where the roaster was). For their shop, Rennie and his partners chose an area of Ashland under-served for coffee

so that they would have a natural clientele and not be competing with their wholesale customers. Once they began work on the location, they finished the roasting space first, moved the equipment in and started roasting.

While the café space was being gutted (it had been a music venue), they fired up the La Marzocco four-group espresso machine temporarily in a back room and spread the word that Noble's staff would open the back door and serve free espresso drinks from 9 to 10 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. This not only let Rennie and company get familiar with the new machine and get to know their customers, it also generated a growing cult following. Each hour-long block saw the space buzzing with enthusiastic customers chatting with the co-owners and each other, even calling friends on their cell phones to tell them to hurry over for coffee. This went on for two months, until Noble started training its retail staff before opening the front doors for business.

Part of the training involved making the most of the La Marzocco, which is PID-controlled and runs the two boilers at different temperatures, suited to the coffee being pulled. Noble uses only bottomless portafilters, both to maximize crema and

for ease of monitoring how the shot is pulling by looking at how the flow is emerging. "We're attempting to control every variable," says Rennie. "We're taking the mad scientist approach."

Interested as Rennie is in the minutiae of creating the best cup of coffee, he really lives to talk about it. "I, and most of the

people involved in Noble Coffee, love sharing our knowledge with the public," he says. "We share it with our wholesale clients, too, with a helpful, service-oriented perspective." Communication has always been his study and his passion, whether teaching teenagers Spanish or sharing an appreciation of great coffee with his customers in Southern Oregon. Rennie loves to be face to face with people and say, "We just found this coffee from this particular farm, and we roasted it like this—try it!"

Rennie and Peterson feel that especially in Southern Oregon, where drive-thru espresso is the norm, consumer education is a big part of what they have to offer. "We are artisan purveyors of quality, sustainably produced coffee, and that is very different," Rennie says. He often knows the producers; he can put a face and a name on the coffee and bring that to his customers, rather than just saying Noble serves "a Bolivian" or "a Sidamo." "You wouldn't buy a wine that was labeled just 'Riesling' or 'California,' with no specific producer, and the consumer shouldn't see coffees that way," Rennie says. As he does his part to improve the fairness of the coffee trade, he can explain how it works to the customers. "As

NAMESAKE

Noble Coffee's name comes from Rennie's grandfather, Noble Dukes, an adventurous aeronautical engineer who saved up and bought himself his first aircraft at age 17. His curiosity about the world inspired Rennie to name his coffee venture after him.

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people enrich their appreciation of the particular coffees,” he says, “they are willing to choose them instead of generics, and to pay what they are worth, so that the source can make more for growing an excellent coffee. That is very important.”

Noble also educates customers about home brewing—parallel to what Rennie does with his restaurant accounts—so they can achieve the most satisfying cup at home. The staff plans to run evening workshops on brewing methods and cupping so people can experience not only different origins but even different processing techniques, such as trying six different Ethiopian coffees side by side.



JARED RENNIE'S background as a teacher has translated to his work in the café, where he enjoys educating customers about coffee.

Rennie's fluency in Spanish has been unexpectedly useful as well: He can communicate directly with farmers throughout Latin America to source beans via Direct Trade, and it likely also helped him become a judge for last year's Cup of Excellence competition in Nicaragua. “People in the industry are very alert to find out if you're a poseur; they ask what you roast on, how you are sourcing your beans, how you roast this type of bean,” says Rennie. “You have to show your chops.” Once he established his credibility, he was invited to be a CoE judge alongside people from coffee companies such as Zoka Coffee, Ecco Caffè and Intelligentsia Coffee—“amazing people,” he says. Rennie's command of Spanish gave him opportunities to translate and drew the attention of the national media looking for someone to speak directly to them in Spanish on camera. While there, he contacted a farm, Las Termópilas, that had been a CoE winner the previous year but was not in that year's competition. He checked out its current offerings, finding them to be just as outstanding as before, and was able to work directly with the farmer and the mill to bring that coffee to his customers at a lower price than what a CoE winner earns, but still a very good price for the farmer.

Noble's retail space includes vacuum pots, and customers can not only buy them and be taught to use them, they can order their cup of coffee for the day brewed on the spot. From sourcing green coffee to brewers to the end cup, the Noble staff's enthusiasm for innovation is infectious. “We give customers a new brewer and a water filter for it, and it blows their minds,” says Peterson. “We're blowing Southern Oregon up!” ☘

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