

## Coffee calling

### Homer bean roaster dreams of building a better world, one perfect cup at a time

By DEBRA McKINNEY  
Anchorage Daily News

(Published: May 13, 2007)

HOMER -- With a degree in philosophy and dreadlocks halfway down his back, Michael McGuire was headed where the wind blew him when he first rattled into this coastal hamlet in 1995 in his road-weary Volkswagen bus.

He spent that first summer camping out with a community of travelers. Between the late-night campfires and rounds of hacky sack, one thing after another fell into place.

Besides his bus, which he ended up giving away, about all he had back then was a clear mind and deep insight into the difference between good and exceptional coffee.

Better put, who needs more when you're 25, have a head full of knowledge and the passion to do something with it?

Now a father of three and owner of an organic coffee oasis about three miles up East End Road -- K Bay Caffe and K Bay Caffe Roasting Co. -- McGuire is the indisputable coffee sage of Homer. Through the years, he has enlightened coffee drinkers here cup by cup. That's because there are hot caffeinated beverages, and then there's what he serves: a blend of science and art in a cup.

The science behind roasting and preparing coffee the best it can be. The art of knowing, of relying on his finely honed senses. His latte art too -- the hearts, leaves and rosettes he paints atop drinks with frothy steamed milk.

There's other great coffee in town, for sure. And fine baristas. But McGuire's following thinks of him as the Zen coffee master.

That reputation was cinched nearly 10 years ago. Out of hundreds of candidates from all over the country, he made it to the finals of what was the largest barista competition at the time. And he won.

McGuire was working for someone else back then. Now that he's his own boss and is roasting his beans himself, he's immersed in every single detail.

To say he's a perfectionist would be putting it lightly.

He and his employees, for instance, are constantly tweaking the espresso grind to compensate for changes in the environment. The weather (temperature, humidity and barometric pressure), even the opening and closing of doors, can affect espresso extraction by a few seconds, creating a shot that's a bit shy of ideal. And he can't have that.

Shots that don't cut it go down the drain.



McGuire creates "latte art" by pouring frothy steamed milk on top of the coffee. He's a firm believer that great coffee helps make a great day. ( Photo by PAUL MORLEY)



Michael McGuire, owner of K Bay Caffe and K Bay Caffe K Bay Caffe owner and roaster Michael McGuire checks the appearance and aroma of the beans every few seconds so as not to under- or over-roast them. Even the opening of a door can make a difference in the product, he says. ( Photo by PAUL MORLEY)

"I waste coffee out of respect for the coffee," he says, "not out of being disrespectful toward it."

McGuire is just as focused on the big picture. Simply put, that's helping make the world a better place through better coffee.

Next to oil, coffee is the second-most-traded commodity in the world, he said. So he sees his business as an opportunity to put his money where his values are by supporting organic and Fair Trade coffee growers, by giving back to people who show respect for others and the planet.

Thus, the company motto: "Where the bean meets the dream."

About that dream: McGuire likes his customers to understand the coffee bean's journey, to feel a connection with those who plant, tend, harvest, sort and otherwise make their living caring for the beans they're enjoying in their cup. And those who do are willing to drive farther and pay more for it.

The downside of all these high standards and social consciousness is that McGuire is working 60- to 100-hour weeks. But it's OK, he says.

"I love what I do."

## **HOMER HEAVEN**

McGuire was on driveabout to see the country when he headed to Alaska and found what he was looking for here at the end of the road.

He'd graduated from Arizona State University in 1992 after starting in aerospace mechanical engineering, then switching to philosophy his junior year. He also managed an alternative band, taught tennis, waited tables and tended bar while in school.

He was a good bartender, maybe too good because he found himself overindulging. The money was rolling in, so he kept at it after graduating from college.

"So I'm making tons of money, I'm living in a three-bedroom house, just living it up," he said. "And going nowhere."

Reading "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" convinced him he needed to make some changes. About the time he got fed up with the whole bar scene, an opportunity came along that altered the course of his life. He got the chance to work for a specialty coffee company serving Illy Caffè, designer coffee produced by a family dynasty founded in Trieste, Italy, by Francesco Illy, who invented the predecessor to the modern espresso machine in the mid-1930s. McGuire ended up managing its showpiece shop in swanky Scottsdale, Ariz., just 15 minutes from Illy Caffè's North American headquarters.

"I had great gurus," he said of his coffee education. "I was out of school, but my brain was still in that thirsting-for-knowledge phase. And I was sober."

McGuire learned the nuances and complexities of coffee and came to appreciate the depth of its character to the point where he takes his espresso shots straight up. No milk, no sugar. No frills.

But after a year-and-a-half of coffee immersion, it was time to hit the road to see where it would lead. And where it led was Homer.

## **ESPRESSO QUEST**

McGuire spent his first summer doing carpentry work and living and playing outdoors. He then got a job at Smoky Bay Natural Foods and settled in for the winter.

"So I'm living here, and I'm missing great espresso," he said.

"I go around and check out every barista and all the coffee and how they're approaching what they're

doing. And there were people over at Espresso Express who were doing an awesome job. They were the only people who served me my espresso straight into a demitasse, which to me was the first sign they knew what they were doing. They didn't put it in a paper cup and hand it to me. To me that's like having a nice glass of wine in a Styrofoam cup.

"After a month or two, they're like, 'So, what's up? You're the only person drinking straight espresso in this town.' And I told them a little about my story."

Acting as liaison, he hooked them up with Illy.

"Because Illy was really particular about who's going to serve their product," he said. "They wanted to make sure they had some sort of quality control management, and I told them I would be that person."

McGuire started training the coffee shop's staff. Then pulling shifts.

Then came that barista competition in 1998, a few months after he finished the 100-mile Iditasport race on a mountain bike.

The Torani Barista Cup, held in Denver, was sponsored by the Specialty Coffee Association of America. Hundreds applied. The field was narrowed considerably by a written test of technical knowledge and essays demonstrating how deeply baristas cared about their craft. Then came 45 minutes of grilling over the phone. Eight made the final cut.

The playoffs were grueling and included pulling espresso shots and making various drinks while judges did their best to emulate difficult customers who were late for work or much too chatty or unsure of what they wanted ("sweet but not too sweet").

In the end, McGuire was the only barista left standing.

He won a trip for two to Italy. But he and life partner Andrea Huyck were expecting their first baby. Italy had to wait.

## **THE K BAY WAY**

With a child on the way, McGuire moved on from Espresso Express and went into business for himself with La Crema Creations, an espresso shop on wheels run out of a van.

In the fall he bought a drive-through espresso shop up East End Road, and the name K Bay came with it. An allegiant clientele followed him up there.

McGuire started roasting his own beans about three years ago. As fastidious as he is about his coffee, it made sense.

It was about then that he parted with his dreadlocks. He didn't really plan to. He just woke up one day, took a walk in the woods, did a little ceremony, said thanks and goodbye, and cut them off.

It was time, he said.

As a roaster, he's kept his account list short on purpose. He's a small operation and would rather devote himself to a few than spread himself too thin.

In Anchorage, Middle Way Cafe serves his K Bay Dream Blend, an espresso blend he developed from 10 bean varieties.

And he's especially tight with Terra Bella, an all-organic coffee drive-through that recently opened a new coffee shop, cafe and bakery across from the Dimond Center. Owner Linda Vollertsen had heard about him winning the barista competition and tracked him down.

McGuire recently unveiled an organic/Fair Trade espresso blend developed exclusively for Vollertsen called Bella Blend. He spent seven months perfecting it.

He also started roasting the Arctic Rhino Blend developed and taught to him by longtime Anchorage roast master Michael Allen when Allen stopped roasting.

K Bay's Dream Blend can also be found in Hope.

Kent and Melaney Bowman of Bowman's Bear Creek Lodge serve it. So does Grounds for Hope, a seasonal coffee stand run by Bianca Durrant.

"Hands down the best coffee I've ever had," she said. "And I'm a self-proclaimed coffee addict."

McGuire doesn't just supply his clients with beans; he trains the baristas so they'll present his coffee the way it's meant to be.

"We're a really small operation and he'll ... drive up from Homer to train, to help me get the best shot I can out of my machine," Durrant said. "It doesn't seem like he's doing this for money. Otherwise, he wouldn't be spending a whole day in Hope just with me and my husband."

Keeping business personal is important to McGuire. And that goes for the coffee growers too.

Since he started roasting, his plan has been to visit a coffee farm a year. So far he's been to Nicaragua and Kona in Hawaii. A trip to Guatemala in February got postponed when he herniated a disk. But he's headed to Brazil this year to be a judge for the Minas Gerais coffee competition, which last year had 1,800 entries. He hopes to hit Guatemala on the way.

Trips like these help him decide how best to spend his money. And not just in exchange for beans. To deliver donations -- \$1,000, for instance, to a co-op in Nicaragua when its emergency medical fund for workers got depleted. And \$1,000 to a co-op in Guatemala in an area devastated by floods.

"Coffee is one of those opportunities where you can reach in all over the world and give just by choosing the bean," he said. "And you can funnel that down even more to people who are doing great projects for their community."

"Most people would say, 'Yeah, I'll pay a buck more if I can give that to a cause I believe in.' And as far as coffee beans being the second-largest-traded commodity, you can't do that through oil."

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Daily News reporter Debra McKinney can be reached at [dmckinney@adn.com](mailto:dmckinney@adn.com).

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