

The Almanac

THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, SHERBORN, PORTOLA VALLEY AND WOODSIDE

AUGUST 14, 2013 | VOL. 48 NO. 50



WWW.THEALMANACONLINE.COM

Steeped in coffee

Menlo Park resident turns passion for coffee into a business

page 12



Steeped in coffee

Menlo Park resident turns passion for coffee into a business



By Barbara Wood | Photos by Michelle Le

You could say Oscar Nunez, the proprietor of High Note coffee, has coffee in his blood.

Although Mr. Nunez, 42, was born in Staten Island, until the age of 10 he lived just outside San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where his relatives have been growing coffee for more than a century.

"Coffee has always had a place in my life," says Mr. Nunez, who now lives in Menlo Park and imports and roasts the beans and sells them at farmers' markets in Woodside, Portola Valley, Daly City, San Carlos and Palo Alto. He also wholesales coffee around the world, including to such places as China and Poland, and to local restaurants.

The coffee connection was reinforced while he attended Boston University, where he received a degree in environmental science in 1993 and worked as a barista at Terroir Coffee. Owner George Howell was one of the first to roast and sell single source coffees. At Terroir, Mr. Nunez says, "I started to see the value of coffee as a business."

Mr. Howell, something of a legend in the coffee world, was a mentor for Mr. Nunez. But it wasn't until years later, after Mr. Nunez spent a dozen years policing companies for compliance with state environmental rules, and after a few more years consulting for big box companies

He sources his beans directly from growers all over the world, many of whom he met through family connections. The beans are certified as "fair trade," which means that producers are paid at least a minimum price and do not use child labor, pesticides or herbicides.

Today Mr. Nunez imports coffee from Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Peru, Brazil, Indonesia (Java, Sumatra and Sulawesi), Ethiopia, Congo, Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania, in addition to Honduras.

He visits coffee-growing regions looking for quality and quantity, Mr. Nunez says. He tries to work with smaller farmers and pays them directly for their coffee. "The travel is a lot of fun," he says. "The sleeping arrangements are not."

A special goal is to get the world to realize that Honduras grows high quality coffees. "It's become sort of a social mission statement to try to produce a quality cup of Honduran coffee," he says.

He got even more into coffee when he started roasting beans in a borrowed roaster for customers who wanted to know what his wholesale beans tasted like. At first he just gave the finished beans to friends and family, but, once again, Ms. Tronson convinced him to go with his heart. "My girlfriend really thought we could make a



Oscar Nunez of Menlo Park, proprietor of High Note coffee.



One source of the beans is Honduran Capucas, a co-op his relatives belong to.



Oscar Nunez imports his beans directly from growers all over the world.



Freshly roasted Indonesian Sulawesi coffee beans on the left, and the uncooked beans on the right.

STORY

There is a little art, a little science to it. What is his favorite coffee? "Don't tell my family," he laughs. "but my Brazilian Cerrado. I always roast it light and it's just one of my favorite coffees." The Cerrado also has a low acid level, he says, and is smooth and creamy.

Mr. Nunez, who offers tastes of several of his coffees at the farmers' market, is trying to convince the public to try lighter roasted coffees. "Everyone wants it dark," he says. "but I'm trying to move them away from that."

Light roasts not only have more caffeine, he says, but are more flavorful with more apparent fruit and floral notes.

As for his dream future, Mr. Nunez says he'd love to open a cafe with a European-type menu, coffee roasting on site, with roasting classes, and, maybe, film nights on travel to coffee-producing regions. Plus, space to store the coffees he wholesales to other roasters. And lots of bicycle parking, since he is an avid rider.

Where? Preferably right here on the Midpeninsula, maybe Woodside or Portola Valley.

Just how much coffee does Mr. Nunez drink? Maybe enough to be another reason to say he has coffee in his blood — "ridiculous, copious amounts of coffee," he admits.

Barbara Wood is a freelance writer from Woodside whose daughter worked for High Note Coffee this summer and brought home lots of beans, convincing her that light roasts do let you brew very highly caffeinated, but delicious, coffee. ☐



Oscar Nunez pulls a lever to release freshly roasted coffee beans at Canyon Coffee Roastery in Redwood City.