



Chefs Speak Out - March/April 2006



Coffee Roasting with Paul Odom

By Lynn Schwartz

In the early 1990's, the coffee craze was beginning to take off. Pacific Northwest coffee lovers were setting the trend for what would become a nationwide obsession. More than a decade later, with coffee retailers on every corner, coffee consumers are savvy – they are connoisseurs.

"People are passionate about their coffee now. You don't mess with that," warns Paul Odom, owner of Fonté Micro Coffee Roaster. Odom was part of the early boom in Seattle and in 1992 he founded his micro coffee roasting company at the mere age of 22. Not surprising, as Odom was acquainted with the beverage industry early on. He is the son of Milt Odom, owner of the Clearwater Beverage Company, a Coca-Cola bottling franchise. Under Milt Odom's direction, Clearwater was the first bottling company to invent and sell Coke in a can.

But Odom differentiated himself from Seattle's coffee gurus with a vision to offer high-end products to an untapped market – chefs, restaurateurs and hoteliers. At the time, most hotels and many restaurants were not known as the place to get a good cup of coffee. More likely, the weak, bitter, or muddy-tasting brew was something to avoid. But upscale restaurants and luxury hotels understood the importance of excellent coffee and Odom set out to serve them.

"New chefs will live and die by the plates they put out," says Odom. "In the final moments, the dessert and coffee need to be great. The coffee will be the last thing the customer remembers. If the coffee stinks, the customer is walking out the door with that subliminal message."

Similarly, hotels need to offer their guests a delicious morning brew. "Finer hotels are trying to distinguish themselves with a better level of coffee," says Odom, who also provides high-end coffee in filter packs designed for in-room service. And it's not just the large chains; smaller hotels want to improve in-room coffee as well. "When a hotel provides good coffee, it makes the hotel look like they've got their act together."

Today, patrons demand satisfying coffee. Restaurants and hotels will have to respond or lose their competitive edge. Fonté's clients have always included those who take care with the coffee and espresso they serve – award-winning chefs, fine restaurants, and five-star hotel properties like Wynn Resort Las Vegas, Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton, and the Peninsula.

Still, some restaurants and hotels perceive a coffee upgrade as expensive. Actually, the profit margin with coffee is high. "A cost can be 18-cents per cup. You can charge \$2.50," says Odom. Fonté's prices range from \$11 per pound to \$90 per pound for the Genuine Jamaica Blue Mountain, grown on the Blue Mountain range 7,000 feet above the Caribbean Sea; it is one of the highest grown coffees in the world. The tropical rainfall, good soil condition, and meticulous care of the coffee plants produces a coffee advertised for its smooth, rich, harmonized aromas.

What sets Fonté's products apart from other roasters is its specialized approach to production – sourcing high-quality coffee beans, creating unique blends, careful hand roasting, and roasting only to order.

From Fonté's beginning, Odom partnered with Master Roaster Steve Smith, a 27-year veteran with knowledge of the best sourcing regions in the world. Like the grapes that make fine wine, green coffee (the not yet roasted bean) is selected based on the varietal character unique to specific regions. The coffee comes from around the world including Costa Rica, Brazil, Indonesia, and Ethiopia. Fonté then combines the flavors to create one-of-a-kind blends. "We often buy small quantities, lots of 25-100 bags (about 132 lbs) — and maybe there are only 25 bags of that kind in the world. Unlike companies that must deal with large volumes, we can purchase very special coffee in small amounts. This can last us; we can blend it with another coffee."

The company is constantly sourcing for super-premium coffees, which results in their reputation for superior products. One such product is their Special Selection Bin 16, a blend with fruity notes and Indonesian aromas. It has a limited release and is only roasted on Tuesdays and priced at \$16.49 per pound. Chef and restaurateur David Myers from Sona Restaurant in Los Angeles, California uses Bin 16. "We're obsessed with the best — that is why we enjoy the artisan quality of Fonté's coffee," says Meyer.

Coffee beans are perishable and so Odom developed a signature roast-to-order process — the coffee is shipped within 24 hours of roasting and sealed in advanced packaging with one-way freshness valves. "If we roast for you on Monday, we ship out on Monday," says Odom.

Fonté does not roast large, industrial quantities; the coffee is hand-roasted in German-engineered Probat machines that enable the manipulation of heat and airflow. Probat produced the first roaster in the late 19th century and still is considered the world's finest manufacturer of coffee roasters.

Ironically, it is the success of the company, an increasing demand for product and a growing online retail business, that presents Odom with his current challenges. "It is an ongoing effort to continually do what we did 14 years ago." And that is the mission to provide the finest coffees to the most discriminating clientele in the world. "We just don't take on large volume accounts such as an airline. That is not our core competence." Fonté is still small compared to the huge coffee chain companies. Odom likes it that way, "I'm just a squirt and I want to be doing this 30 years from now."

For further information: www.fontecoffee.com.



"Chefs Speak Out" is a monthly column written by freelance writer, Lynn Schwartz. Lynn will interview professional chefs to learn what path they followed to success. Students will also receive tips on how to chart their own culinary careers.