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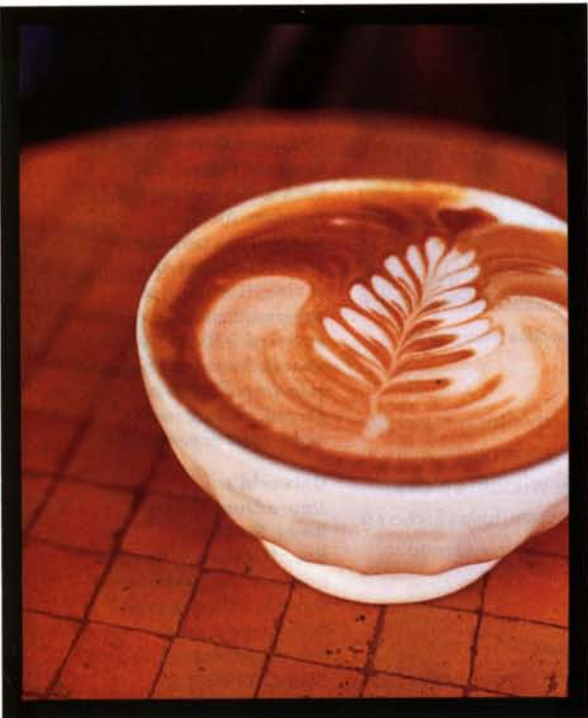
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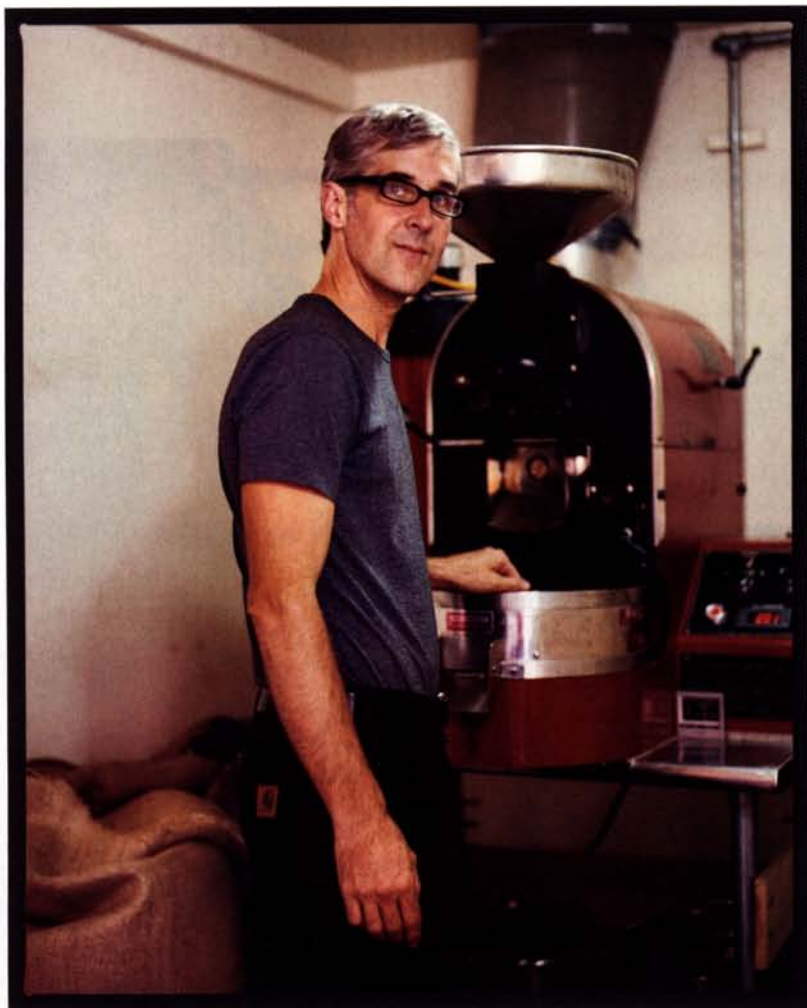
Coffee Nation



Put down that cup of average joe: there's a coffee renaissance afoot in America. FRANCINE MAROUKIAN sips her way across the country to find the crème de la crème. Plus: A java-lover's dictionary

Caffeine Fix Clockwise from top left: A latte from San Francisco's Blue Bottle Coffee Co.; Shola Olunloyo, a local chef and regular at Philadelphia's La Colombe Torrefaction; one of 15 coffee varieties at Zingerman's, a Michigan institution.

EVERY DAY, AMERICANS drink about 400 million cups of coffee, and I am nothing but grateful for my generous share. I got my first intoxicating taste as a 10-year-old in the markets of Istanbul, and the lure of coffee can still pull me out of bed in the morning. Coffee does more than anchor my day; it roots me as I travel. My twitchy need for flavor over sameness propels me past those coffee-shop clones into cafés serving java from local roasters. The beans may come from Africa-Arabia, Latin America, or any of the other growing regions around the globe. But the distinctive way those beans are roasted is what marks the coffee in certain cities for me, from »



Getting Toasted at Blue Bottle Coffee Co. Clockwise from above: Owner James Freeman in his compact workshop; small batches of newly roasted beans; the company's vintage Italian espresso machine.

Blue Bottle's fudgy brews in San Francisco to the velvety blends of Philadelphia's La Colombe.

Long before Americans knew how to pronounce words like venti and breve, we lined up to buy coffee from our hometown roasters. It wasn't until the postwar years, when supermarket convenience triumphed over freshness, that coffee became just another mass-produced item, like detergent. The sliced-bread blandness and that little plastic scoop stuck in the grounds didn't just replace real flavor; big-brand uniformity obliterated the relationship between regionality and roasting style. Stripped from its community roots, coffee began to taste the same no matter where you went. While newly minted suburbanites considered it modern to perk their morning cups with coffee from vacuum-sealed cans, nonconformists rebelled against the split-level monotony by taking refuge in urbane coffeehouses



from North Beach to Greenwich Village. Like the Parisian existentialists of the twenties, the Beat Generation huddled in their cafés and showed "squares" how different life could be if you wore black, recited poetry, and drank coffee you couldn't see through.

Half a century later, in this day of corporate coffee chains, I've embarked on a quest into uncharted caffeine country: the realm of American craft roasters who are focusing on bean sourcing and signature style, all while revitalizing independent café life. In doing so, they are putting the buzz back into their neighborhoods—not to mention every single one of my mornings.

Blue Bottle Coffee Co., San Francisco

Down an alleyway and under the raised-track garage door of an architect's wood shop stands the Blue Bottle kiosk, more coffee rave than café: I feel lucky to have found it and wonder if it will be there when I go back. Despite its cobbled-together look and spontaneous vibe, this 10-foot-by-10-foot stand, made from salvaged city materials, didn't appear overnight. Roaster James Freeman spent many days walking his dog around the Hayes Valley before he decided the place was right: "This is not a hazelnut latté neighborhood; it felt like they were our people." The coffee he serves is equally authentic—both certifiably and traditionally organic. Freeman's Three Africans blend, a fairly dark roast, bears the subtle imprint of dried blueberries and cardamom. The earthy Yemen Sana'ani is one of the few single-estate origin coffees that makes an excellent shot of espresso: complex, thick, and almost buttery. In Blue Bottle's "world headquarters"—a 182-square-foot

Oakland workroom—Freeman roasts about 40,000 pounds of coffee beans a year using an infrared seven-pound-batch machine, which he describes as “heartbreakingly” small. But he tells me he’s looking to buy a battered old 12-kilo machine if he can figure out how to run it without smoking out the neighbors. A fan of personalized equipment, Freeman uses a customized stainless-steel drip bar to make the coffee at the kiosk. Grinding beans to order and using this drip-by-drip method, instead of holding brewed coffee in a “hot pot,” isn’t just slow, it’s excruciating. When you haven’t had your coffee yet, four minutes can feel like forever. But you get what you wait for: a deeply aromatic and heavy-bodied coffee. Every Saturday, Freeman transports his second kiosk—a propane-fired, stainless-steel single-axle trailer—over the Bay Bridge and parks it under a folding awning at the Ferry Building Farmers Market. He heats water on a Coleman stove and between about 7:20 A.M. to 2 P.M. serves espresso drinks, drip, or New Orleans iced coffee to roughly 750 people. “Oh, it’s intense,” he says. “I close my eyes on Saturday nights and see milk swirling in a pitcher.”

315 Linden St.; 415/252-7535; www.bluebottlecoffee.net.

Intelligentsia Coffee Roasters, Chicago

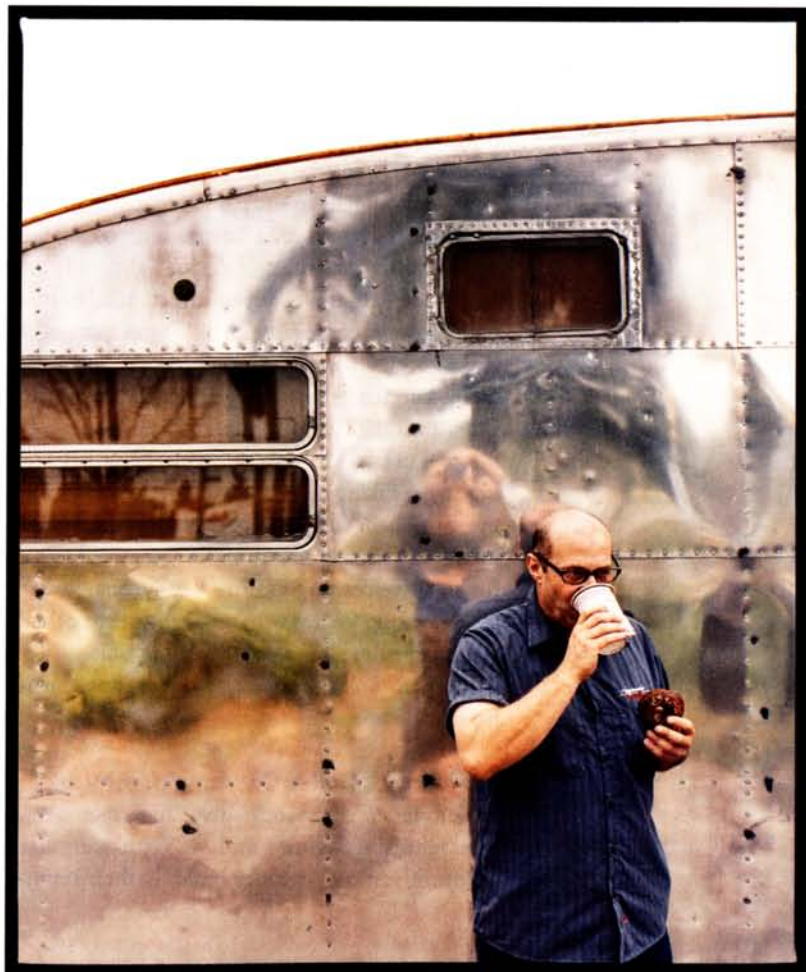
At first glance, it’s hard to reconcile the size of Intelligentsia’s factory, crew, and 1.5 million-pound annual production with the term *micro-roaster*. But what qualifies cofounders Doug Zell and his wife,

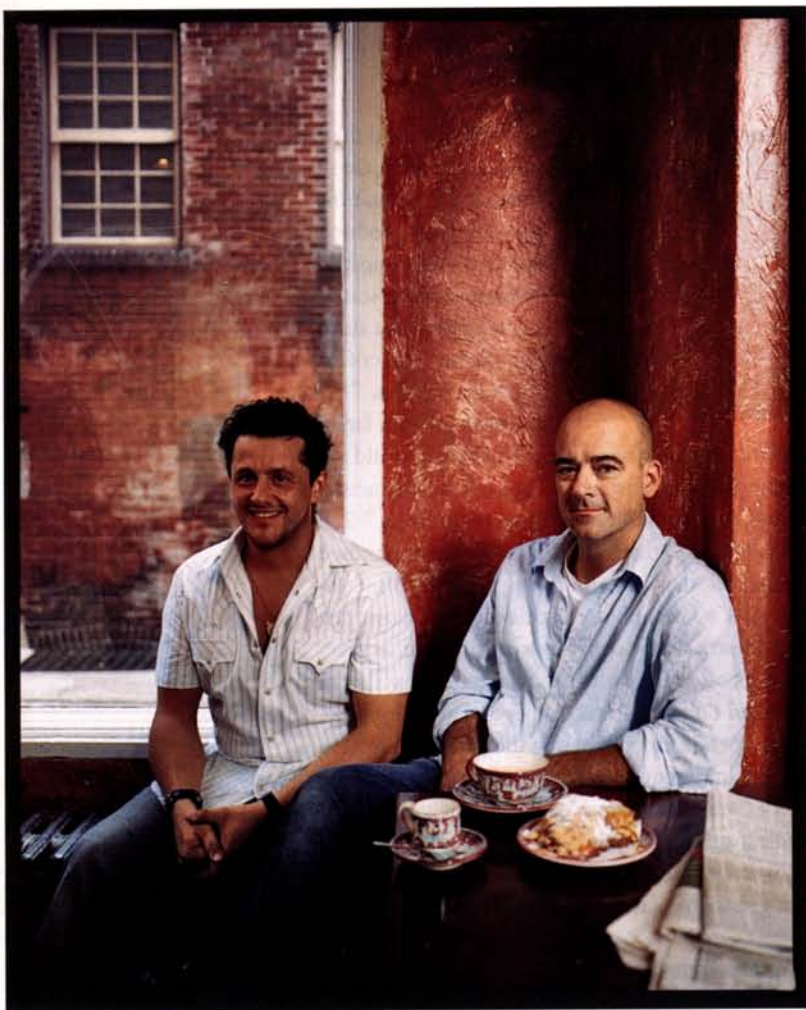


Emily Mange, and their director of coffee, Geoff Watts, as micro isn’t the quantity they produce. Rather, it’s how engaged the partners are in sourcing, stopping just short of growing the coffee beans themselves. “We

are involved with farmers from the very beginning, working to build the coffee we want and using long-term contracts at prices that reward and encourage quality,” Zell says. Although the idea of fair trade gets bandied about in today’s \$8.5 billion specialty-coffee industry, it’s a complicated socioeconomic contract that doesn’t always correlate to quality and, as practiced, is often little more than a marketing slogan stamped on a bag. To take it beyond a catchphrase, Watts spends more than half the year traveling the mountainous equatorial regions between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn with one goal: establishing relationships that provide small farmers with economic security in exchange for the best they can grow. The result is a portfolio of 30 coffees: >>

**Ann Arbor
Coffee Connection**
Clockwise from
top: Zingerman’s
15-blend menu;
owner Paul Saginaw
at the Roadshow
drive-through;
outside the deli.





Philly's Finest at La Colombe
 Clockwise from above left: Owners Jean Philippe Iberti, left, and Todd Carmichael; the understated storefront off Rittenhouse Square; a weigh-in.

both single-estate origins and blends, featuring Intelligentsia's World Exclusives, seven coffees that the partners consider to be the future of the bean. These coffees—from the smooth, ripe, fruity Colombian Tres Santos to La Tortuga sourced in Honduras, with its notes of cocoa, almond, and tamarind—are the result of direct collaboration with growers' cooperatives. This connectedness has always been a part of Intelligentsia's culture. After the 12-kilo roaster was moved out of the original Lakeview café, the team didn't fill the space with the kind of tables for two that typically end up seating one, resulting in the separate togetherness found in many chain coffee shops. Instead, they brought in oversized barn planks to create communal seating for 10, a welcoming gesture that resonated with locals looking for a way to come together not only at the same time, but also at the same table.

3123 N. Broadway Ave.; 773/348-8058; www.intelligentsiacoffee.com.

Zingerman's Coffee Co., Ann Arbor, Michigan

As cofounders of the innovative Zingerman's Delicatessen, Paul Saginaw and Ari Weinzwieg have spent the last two decades building their reputa-



tion by traveling the world in search of the best foodstuffs. But when it comes to coffee, there's no need to leave town. I meet up with computer programmer turned Zingerman's roaster Allen Leibowitz at work in his 1,000-square-foot niche of the 24,000-square-foot mail-order warehouse where one man and one machine roast about 40,000 pounds of coffee a year, 66 pounds at a time. But Leibowitz isn't in a hurry to change that. "Doing things on this scale gives me a better understanding of exactly what a specific bean likes in terms of heat," he says. "Some require low heat over a longer period in order to highlight their best characteristics." Take the India Coorgi: trial and error taught Leibowitz that the beans need to be roasted just slightly darker, at higher heat over a shorter period of time, to bring out the spiciness and hints of clove and mace. At this point, because of the quantity of beans he buys, Leibowitz is limited to working with brokers, instead of directly importing from producers, and relies on cuppings to become familiar with the taste of the beans. "We're not these firms' biggest customer,

but they know we buy the best," he says. Of the 15 Zingerman's coffees, 12 are single-origin, like the thick and chocolaty Papua New Guinea. The remaining three are blends, including Roadhouse Joe, a »



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slightly nutty mix with lots of body and no bite. The coffees are used throughout the Zingerman's businesses on a rotating basis. The Roadhouse blend is even featured as an ingredient in the restaurant's spicy tomato barbecue sauce. But the quirkiest place to get a cup—and give a nod to Detroit's car culture—is at Roadshow, a 1952 peanut-shaped Royal Spartanette aluminum trailer coach customized to look like

a coffee pot. Roadshow is parked outside the Roadhouse restaurant, two miles from the deli, at the corner of Jackson Avenue and West Stadium Street. Pull up to the window and order your Roadhouse Joe with a cakey nutmeg-spiced doughnut rolled in Muscovado brown sugar. The combination is sure to keep you driving in circles.

422 Detroit St.; 734/663-3354; www.zingermans.com.

La Colombe Torrefaction, Philadelphia

After hatching their plans in a nearby pub, former baristas Todd Carmichael and Jean Philippe Iberti put a 15-kilo Vittoria roaster in the window of their café and went into the coffee business, cranking out enough smoke to season swanky Rittenhouse Square and attract the attention of the local fire department. Over the next 10 years,

Coffee Glossary

Wonder what's brewing in the bean business? Here's the latest lingo for any aspiring coffee connoisseur.

Cupping

A precise tasting process, often performed around a revolving circular table, designed to determine the flavor profile—body, acidity, and aroma—of a coffee.

Drip Bar

This tiered unit has filters on the top level

that drip coffee into cups underneath, while the barista moistens the grounds, waits, adds more water, and stirs.

Fair Trade

A movement to set an international price for coffee beans, intended to enable small farmers to be able to sustain their land and families. Look for "Fair Trade Certified" labels.

Fluid Air-Roaster

A device that releases hot air into the roasting chamber (imagine a

popcorn popper) to levitate the beans and prevent them from coming into contact with the hot metal canister, which in traditional drum cooking can scorch a dark roast.

Green Coffee

Beans that have not yet been roasted.

Traditional Organic Coffee

Crops grown without synthetic chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

Roasting

The degree to which the green coffee bean is

"cooked," along with the "heat recipe" (how high a temperature is applied and for how long). The roasting brings out or diminishes certain flavor characteristics in the bean. Beans that are less roasted have a tendency toward a bright acidity, like lemon; beans that have been roasted more tend to have a bittersweet quality, like cocoa.

Single-Origin Coffee

A coffee produced in one geographic area.

Single-Estate Origin Coffee

An unblended coffee made from a single bean that bears the name of its unique grower and tastes distinctively of its region.

Specialty Coffee

Also called gourmet or premium, this variety is made from exceptional beans grown only in ideal climates; these beans often have characteristic flavors shaped by the soil in which they were grown. —F.M.



Blue Bottle's chicory coffee extract, left, served at the Ferry Building Saturday Farmers Market in San Francisco. Right: Drinking La Colombe in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square.

the partners made their creation a destination, a feat that impressed city officials so much that they affixed colorful French Quarter markers to the street signs on the café's corner. Making my way through the crowd inside—1,500 people a day get their coffee at the 28-foot-long turn-

of-the-century mahogany bar—I find nothing for sale except coffee drinks: no muffins, wraps, or logo-emblazoned travel mugs. The partners are roasters, not retailers, and the strength of the company rests on four distinctive blends—ranging from the deeply rich and truly dark Cor-

sica to the creamy and slightly sweet Nizza, which tastes delicately of caramel. There is little confusion about priorities. La Colombe coffee may be the choice of star chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Alain Ducasse, but every decision the partners make is in service to their blends. "Product first, customer second," Carmichael says. Loyalty is tied to the green coffee bean as a blend component, not as the product of a specific region: it's either a good note in the chord or it's off. Then comes the heat. Again, the partners stay committed to their four recipes. Instead of roasting the beans independently and then blending, the partners blend first and then roast. "Think soup," Carmichael says as he shows me the control panel behind the towering fluid air-roaster that turns out about 1.5 million pounds a year. "You wouldn't cook all the ingredients separately and then combine them. You find the right temperature to cook them together so their flavors mingle and marry."

130 S. 19th St.; 215/563-0860; www.lacolombe.com. ✦

LEFT: KATE POWERS; RIGHT: DAVID NICOLAS



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