

Local Roasters: The latest from a trio of coffee purveyors

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Coffee is an essential part of the morning routine for most people - but what do you really know about your morning brew?

The Pilot visited with three local coffee roasters to find out what they do, how they do it, and where to get the freshest locally roasted coffee around.

Chetco Coffee

Chetco Coffee in Brookings began as an experiment in July 2013 when Todd Pearson wanted to try roasting his own coffee beans. He put together a roaster he made out of a steel pot, spoons he used for blades, and a small motor to power those blades. Then he created a stand for his heat gun, which added the heat necessary to roast the beans while they turned.

Pearson successfully roasted about one pound of beans at a time. He was so excited, he told his co-workers and friends about it, and soon was roasting coffee to share with them.

“In August 2013, we decided to make our little coffee roasting experiment a business, since word of mouth was keeping Todd very busy,” said co-owner Kathleen Pearson.

Not long after, demand was getting to be more than Todd Pearson could manage by using his one-pound bean-roasting method. So he constructed a rotisserie-style roasting method using a barbecue and a steel perforated drum that rotated over the heat, again propelled by a small motor.

This method served him for several years, although he now has an official hot-air coffee roaster.

Pearson roasts in small, 3-pound batches to maintain consistent quality, on average roasting about 50 pounds of coffee a week.

“We typically roast to order, which means our coffee is always very fresh,” he said. “It does not sit around in bags on a shelf for months.

“We use top-quality bags with one-way valves, which allow the coffee gas to escape but no air to come in.”

Chetco offers customized roasting and custom blends for its customers, in a variety of coffee bags that range from 5 pounds down to 2 ounces.

And they guarantee the freshness of their coffee. “Our goal is to deliver an excellent-quality product with the best customer service,” said Kathleen Pearson.

Chetco Coffee buys organic, Fair Trade, green coffee beans in 150-pound burlap bags.

“We pride ourselves on having top-quality Arabica coffee beans, which are mountain-grown and handpicked,” said Pearson. “We buy from companies that offer their workers fair wages.”

Chetco Coffee does not have its own storefront, although customers can find the company’s whole coffee beans or ground coffee in a variety of locations.

And customers can call the company directly to get coffee, and to place custom orders for local delivery or to have it shipped. Or they can use the website to place orders.

Chetco’s fresh-roasted coffee is served at the Farmer’s Market, Bell & Whistle Coffee House, Vista Pub Restaurant, Black Trumpet Bistro, Ambiance by the Sea and at the Coffee Cave at Brookings-Harbor High School (if you’re a student or teacher at the school).

“We’ve kept our prices low, despite the rising cost of freight and product, because our desire is to bring an excellent product to Brookings without breaking our community members’ pocketbooks,” said Kathleen Pearson.

Nectar of Life Coffee

Martin and Hannah Jennings founded Nectar of Life Coffee Co. in January 2003 in Sandpoint, Idaho, starting part-time with a small Diedrich Roaster. They moved their business to Pistol River in 2018.

They said they roast only the finest gourmet Arabica coffees, and only coffees that are certified as both organic and Fair Trade.

Using certified, organic and Fair Trade coffees is important to the Jennings, who go to great lengths to maintain the proper certifications.

“They use a lot of pesticides in conventionally grown coffee,” Martin Jennings said. “It’s really bad for us, bad for the environment and bad for the farmers. I personally wouldn’t drink coffee that isn’t organic.”

Nectar of Life deals only with Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) Certified Fair Trade coffees. FLO represents only small family farms, not estate-grown coffees, said Jennings. By joining co-ops, small farmers don’t fall prey to “coyotes” who would buy the coffee cheaply and send it out to be roasted.

The co-ops have their own mills, he said, so they can get more money for their coffee because they can bypass the middlemen. With estate-grown coffees, there is no guarantee that the workers are getting paid a fair wage.

The Jennings use a custom-made roaster that’s technically a drum roaster but has sophisticated air controls that make it similar to an air roaster.

“The roaster can do about 200 pounds an hour, but we don’t do that much right now,” Martin Jennings said. In summer, they are roasting 300 to 350 pounds per week, whereas in winter they might roast up to 1,000 pounds a week. “We have a lot of reserve capacity,” he noted.

The roaster allows Jennings to precisely control the heat and roasting process for both the lighter and darker roasts. (Lighter roasts are “bright and sweet,” because he runs more air in the roasting process.)

Green coffee beans are hard like rocks, and relatively tiny, when they arrive in giant gunnysacks to the facility adjacent to the Jennings’ home.

The beans go through two processes during roasting. The “first crack” is when the water vapor comes out of the coffee and starts to break down the cell walls. The “second crack” is when the roasting process begins breaking down the organic acids.

“Our French roast is about as done as coffee can get.” Martin said. “The beans actually double in size during a French roast.”

Nectar of Life fresh-roasts all of its coffees as they are ordered. Local customers generally receive their coffee within two to three days of roasting.

“After you roast coffee, it puts off carbon dioxide for 10 to 12 hours,” Martin Jennings said. They immediately package the coffee in bags that have one-way de-gassing valves, to keep the coffee fresh for up to six months.

“First Rise Bakery in Brookings uses our coffee in their store,” Hannah Jennings said. “OxenFrē uses it, too, and at the table does fresh grinding. Semi-Aquatic art studio carries our lighter-roasted coffees and often serves the coffee during the ‘Art Walk.’ McKay’s Market sells our coffee in Gold Beach.”

Nectar of Life also is available on the company's website. If you use the coupon code "Curry25," you can receive a locals-only discount of 25% for your first two orders of coffee from the website.

Wild Rivers Coffee

In Crescent City, Wild Rivers Coffee is a small-batch roaster dedicated to using only organic, Fair Trade coffee.

Norris Harper, Jr. became interested in roasting coffee in 2012. "I was looking for a new business venture, and all the research I did made me believe that coffee roasting was the next big thing," Harper said.

In August 2013, he joined a week-long class in Idaho where he learned the basics of roasting, how to create a flavor profile so he could duplicate the roasts, and the different stages of the roast that can be used to manipulate the flavor of the coffee bean. The class was offered by Stephen Diedrich at his Diedrich Roasters manufacturing facility near Sandpoint.

Harper opened Wild Rivers Coffee in June 2015 and began selling at the Crescent City farmers markets. His coffee is available in Crescent City at Wild Rivers Market, The Mail Room, Del Norte Office Supply and the Rumiano Cheese Store.

Enotica, Mystic Bean and Java Hut Express in Wal-Mart serve his coffee.

"As far as I know, I'm the only roaster in the region that roasts coffee on a fluid-bed roaster," Harper said.

"My coffee is suspended on hot air and roasted very similarly to the way a hot-air popcorn popper works.

"This process blows any smoke, chaff and soot out of the roaster and away from the coffee bean, which produces a very clean cup of coffee without the smoky or burnt flavors typically associated with coffee."

Wild Rivers roasts coffee to order, usually producing from 15 to 30 pounds per week. Harper said he has the capacity to roast 100 pounds of coffee per day using his commercial roaster. "I have plenty of room to grow," he said.

For more information about Chetco Coffee, visit <https://www.chetcocoffee.com>. For more about Nectar of Life Coffee, visit <https://www.nectar-of-life.com>. To contact Wild Rivers Coffee, call 707-954-4572 or visit the booth at the Crescent City farmers markets.