

Macro Roaster of the YEAR

Gimme! Coffee



Gimme! staff at the Taughannock Falls Overlook, a few miles up the road from the roastery. Ithaca is Gorges! | photo by Wendy Houseworth

BY
RIVERS
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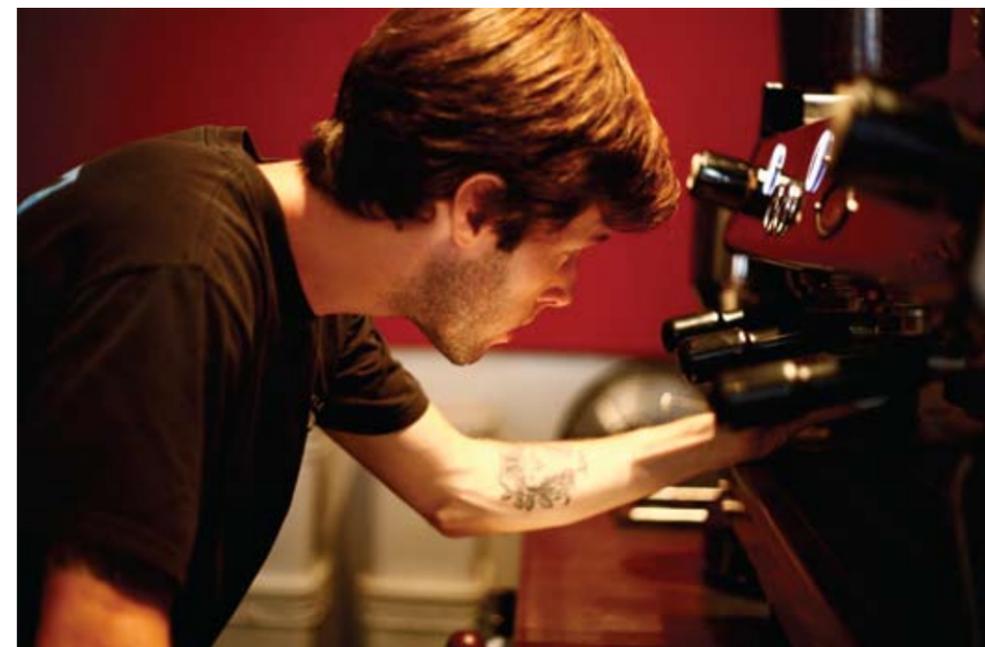
When Gimme! Coffee opened its first retail store in the year 2000 in a tiny 10-by-14-foot space in Ithaca, N.Y., owner Kevin Cuddeback decided that espresso would be his calling card. “A shot of espresso, perfectly prepared, is the fullest expression of the ‘enigmatically powerful’ coffee bean,” reads the company’s website.

The following year, when Gimme! Coffee opened a second location and started roasting in the back of the store, Cuddeback and master roaster John Gant poured themselves into the craft. They geeked out over the smallest details while trying to master the finer points of air roasting on their pair of 20-kilo Sivetz fluid-bed roasters.

Today, Gimme! Coffee is sourcing coffee with the same obsessive attention to detail—even overhauling its roasting program in pursuit of a better cup.

“Our initial focus was on quality beverage preparation, and that’s influenced everything that’s come after,” says Colleen Anunu, the company’s director of coffee. “Now that we’re sourcing and roasting really high-quality coffees, we’re using a drum roaster and focusing more on the product than the roast level. In a way, it’s come full circle, because our approach to roasting is now influencing the way we prepare beverages. Our evolution isn’t linear, it’s constantly in flux.”

It’s this relentless pursuit of achievement in all phases of the business that made Gimme! Coffee *Roast’s* Macro Roaster of the Year. The company’s coffees have won acclaim high and far; the *New York Press* raved that Gimme!’s coffees are “hands, shoulders, ears and skull above any cup of coffee we’ve tasted anywhere,” and the company’s coffees have won Good Food Awards, which spotlight artisan food products in the United States, for the past two years. The company is also on the vanguard of sustainability, with a flourishing relationship coffee program and a wildly successful composting initiative.



Barista Phil Ashworth pulling a shot at the Lorimer Street cafe in Brooklyn. | photo by Debbie Rabinovici

THE WINNER’S STATS

ESTABLISHED 2000, as “pocket espresso bar”; small-batch roastery opened the following year

LOCATION Ithaca, N.Y. and New York City

EMPLOYEES 75

OWNER Kevin Cuddeback

RETAIL LOCATIONS Seven retail stores

WHOLESALE CUSTOMERS About 200

ROASTING OUTPUT A little over 300,000 pounds this year

WEBSITE www.gimmecoffee.com



Zoey Thorson, manager of the Roebing Street cafe in Brooklyn, pouring latte art. photo by Debbie Rabinovici

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Now with seven retail locations—three in New York City and four in upstate New York—and a roasting operation that produced more than 300,000 pounds of coffee last year, Gimme! Coffee is firmly established as one of New York’s premier roasters and coffee bars. But Cuddeback and all of Gimme! Coffee’s coffee-crazed employees aren’t about to rest on their laurels.

Learning from Experience

A onetime wedding DJ and auctioneer, Cuddeback caught the coffee bug in the late '90s, when he partnered on a cafe venture that failed within a couple of years. He counts it as an essential learning experience. “At that point I knew I loved coffee, and that people love great coffee, but I also knew I had to be a sole proprietor,” he says.

He opened the first Gimme! Coffee espresso bar shortly afterward, with a sliver of cash and tons of energy. “I basically became a bootstrapping new-project enthusiast,” he continues. “I built systems and handed them off for others to follow, and I taught myself how to plan, design and build new locations. All the while, I was experientially learning how to manage a business.”

The decision to roast came easily, as industry veteran John Gant was Cuddeback’s first barista and had a yen to get back into roasting. Wanting better quality control and a vertically integrated business

model, Cuddeback installed a 1980s Sivetz air roaster in the back of his second store and the duo got busy.

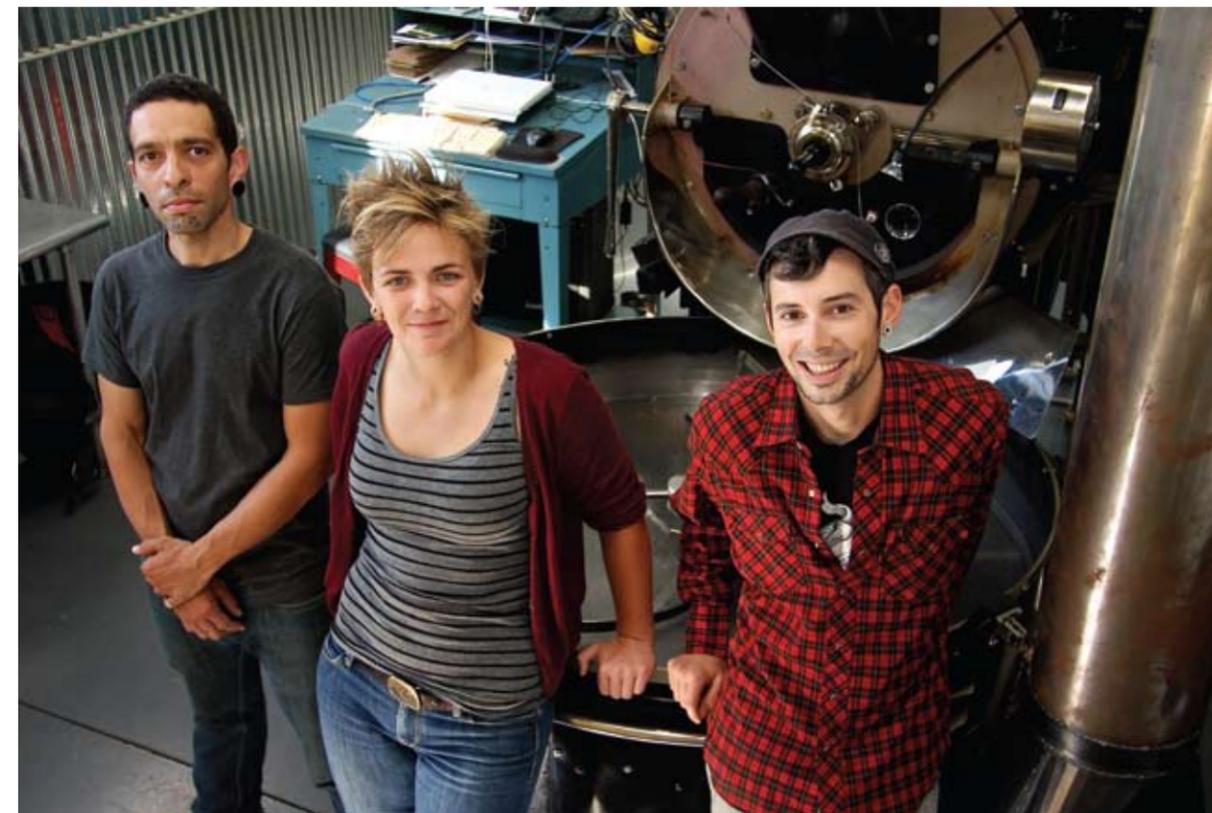
“John’s approach was to figure out how to make air roasting a viable style for specialty coffee,” says Anunu. The company worked diligently to reach that goal, purchasing a second Sivetz a few years later and modifying both machines to better control airflow. One of the Sivetz roasters featured a programmable logic controller that allowed the roasters at Gimme! to accurately control both airflow and gas during the course of the roast. In effect, Anunu was able to modify the machine to roast like a profiling machine rather than a rapid roaster.

Gimme! Coffee’s roastery moved to its current location in the rural outskirts of Ithaca in 2007, began drum roasting in 2009 and fully switched over in 2011. “We took on a 5-kilo Probat roaster as I started becoming more involved with sourcing and developing roast profiles,” says Anunu. “We just got more into the drum style over time and finally installed a 45-kilo Probat in the past year.”

Building Relationships

Direct trade is all the rage among high-end roasters, but Amina Omari, managing director for Gimme! Coffee, prefers the term “relationship coffee.” “‘Direct trade’ is misleading, because it’s really an entire system,” she says. “It’s not like once we go in to talk with the farmer,

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The roasting team: from left to right, Jacob Landrau, Colleen Anunu and Andrew Lunn. photo by Wendy Houseworth

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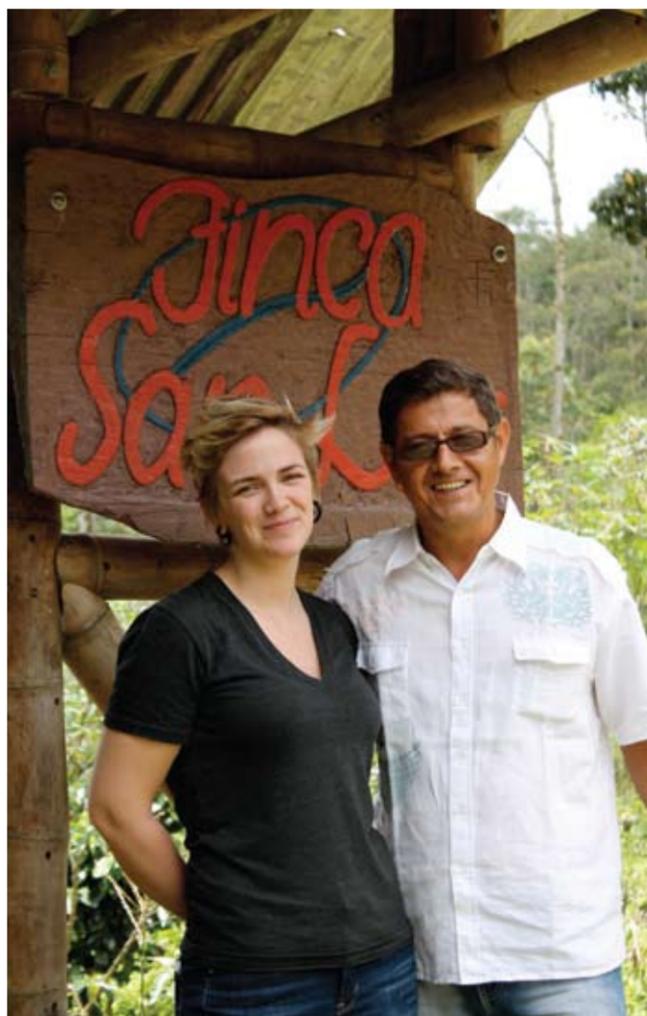
Brand Exclusivity

the beans are magically appearing on our doorstep. There's a team of people all the way through the supply chain—from mill owners to exporters to importers. These relationships are all important."

One such exporter is Colombia's Virmax Café, which Gimme! Coffee relies on for many of its high-quality microlots. Virmax has been instrumental in introducing the company to such farms and cooperatives as Finca San Luis in Colombia, Providencia de Atitlan in Guatemala, and La Libertad in Ecuador. This year, more than 85 percent of the company's single-origin coffees are relationship coffees, a 10 percent jump from last year.

The relationships require more than an introduction, however. They're built on mutual respect and a willingness to engage for several years. "I need to be able to work with exporters, importers and project managers I can trust, because we're trying to build lasting relationships," says Anunu. "That includes providing full transparency and traceability, so that no one's hiding any information. And, of course, the coffee has to be high-quality, generally 85 or above."

As the relationships mature, Gimme! often invests in the farms' continued success. Omar Arango, owner of Finca San Luis,



Colleen Anunu and Omar Arango at Finca San Luis, one of Gimme! Coffee's relationship coffee farms in Colombia. | photo courtesy of Gimme! Coffee

was on the verge of giving up his organic certification due to high production costs and low yields. Upon initiating a relationship with Arango, Gimme! Coffee started paying high premiums for the coffee, prefinancing his harvest, funding agronomy classes and supporting his transition to fixed farm costs. "We just ran a huge campaign for Omar, where we added \$2 premiums to each bag of coffee we sold," Anunu says enthusiastically. "All that money's going directly into his new mill, which will eventually lower his production costs. We raised about \$3,700 for the project."

Omari and Anunu say it's important to help customers understand that they're part of the relationship as well. "We want them to understand all the artistry going into the roasting process and beverage preparation, but also the huge economic impact they have on our community and our supply chain," says Anunu. "The value chain doesn't stop at the barista. Our customers are involved in it all the way."

Seeking Sustainability

"We aspire to be sustainable by balancing people and profits," Cuddeback says. "That means being real, being human and fostering an enterprise that encourages the same in others. We're just lucky enough to have chosen coffee as the vehicle for that."

Gimme! Coffee has sourced organic, shade-grown and fairly traded coffees from the beginning and gives back to the community whenever possible. But the company's sustainability agenda took a dramatic step forward in 2006 when Professor Jason Hamilton gave a series of talks to the staff. A global change biologist and sustainability educator at Ithaca College—and a macchiato loyalist—Hamilton presented a four-part platform that informs the company's decisions to this day.

He said when confronted with a choice, the company should ask: Is it healthy for the business? Is it healthy for the individual? Is it healthy for the community? And is it healthy for the environment? "It gave us some rigor into how we look at sustainability," says Omari. "It's one thing to recycle bottles and say you're sustainable. It's another thing to try to analyze the entire business."

When Gimme! opened its current roastery in 2007, it chose to renovate an existing farm rather than build a new facility. The company restored and renovated the outbuildings to use radiant floor heat, soy-based insulation and passive solar gain.

In addition to switching to 100 percent green-certified power sources in 2008, the roaster launched an extremely successful composting program in its Ithaca locations to reduce waste. Thanks to their compostable cups, straws and other materials, the Ithaca stores are diverting more than 95 percent of their waste stream away from the landfill—a remarkably large percentage for any business.

Gimme! also considers community impact when deciding where to open its coffee bars, looking for neighborhoods that could use a boost. Each of these "third places"—defined as spaces that are neither home nor work—is intended to transform neighborhoods by giving people a place to come together. Omari says the company's State Street store helped revitalize Ithaca's West End community.

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In the drying tents at Finca Linda Vista, one of Gimme! Coffee's relationship coffee farms, in Honduras. From left to right, Benjamin Paz (from Beneficio San Vicente), Joel Guzmán, and Colleen Anunu. Atlas Coffee Importers is Gimme! Coffee's importing partner for the Linda Vista. | photo courtesy of Gimme! Coffee

Serving Customers for Years to Come

Gimme! Coffee's retail stores are still the heart of the business, although they're a little less espresso-obsessed than they once were. "Our baristas are freakin' awesome and undergo tons of training, but at this point we're looking at how we can highlight our coffees in a number of different ways," Omari says. "Whether it's pour-over or espresso or finding other ways to deepen people's connection to our relationship coffees, we're open to it."

It can be a bumpy process, though. "We've gotten some pushback the past couple of years because our coffee is more expensive, and we've taken away things like the roast level," Anunu says. "But the shift is totally worth it, because our customers are much more knowledgeable. They're looking forward to crop after crop from all these great farms."

Gimme! Coffee hopes it can bring that same passion to other parts of the business in the coming years. The company recently

opened an in-house bakery, allowing managers to find local sources of produce, flour, eggs and butter. "We want the same kind of transparency in our baked goods as we have in our coffee," says Omari. Gimme! Coffee is also looking to build on its retail strengths within its wholesale program—"essentially bringing the distinguishing characteristics of our coffees to more customers."

"Our goal is to create customers who are as passionate about the coffee as we are," Omari continues. "That's the way to build something lasting. Find growers who are passionate about producing quality coffee, combine that with our passion for buying the coffee, and sell it to people who can relate to it. It's incredibly gratifying."

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