

Micro Roaster of the YEAR

Olympia Coffee Roasting Company



The staff of Olympia Coffee Roasting Company. | photo by Sarah Cass

BY
RIVERS
JANSSEN

When Oliver Stormshak roasts, he's like a little kid. All he thinks about is sugar.

Inspired by his food science studies, Stormshak uses his Diedrich IR-12 to slowly stretch a coffee's sugar molecules throughout the bean's entire cell structure. "We start with relatively low gas pressure and restricted airflow," says Stormshak.

"Once we see the coffee move past its turn point without dropping in temperature, we apply a little more energy into the roast. ... We basically stack energy on top of energy until we hit first crack, and then we race toward our target and temperature as quickly as possible."

Stormshak says the technique—which he calls caramelization roasting—locks in a coffee's origin flavors and inherent sweetness. "It makes the terroir and processing totally transparent to the customer and produces a dynamic, super-sweet coffee with a lot of acidity," he says.

The results have been wildly successful for Olympia Coffee Roasting, which Stormshak co-owns with brothers Sam and Andrew Schroeder. Olympia Coffee is producing a series of syrupy, citrusy and floral coffees that are winning acclaim throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The company's baristas placed second and fifth using Olympia coffee at the 2011 U.S. Brewers Cup, and they took four of the top five spots in the 2012 Brewers Cup Northwest regional championship. "A walk in the woods in springtime" is how *Coffee Review* recently described the company's Costa Rica Herbazu Villa Sarchi.

All in all, it's a sweet place to be for a couple of self-described coffee nerds who weren't sure what the future held just a few years ago.

Reinvention

Neither Stormshak nor Sam Schroeder were coffee newbies when they took over Olympia Coffee Roasting in 2010. A barista in high school, Stormshak worked at Starbucks as a barista and retail trainer before spending 10 years wearing a number of hats at Batdorf & Bronson Coffee Roasters in Olympia.

Oliver Stormshak roasting. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.



THE WINNER'S STATS

ESTABLISHED 2004; operated by current owners since 2010

LOCATION Olympia, Wash.

EMPLOYEES 14

OWNERS Oliver Stormshak, Sam Schroeder and Andrew Schroeder

ORIGINAL OWNERS Tim Hunter and Terry Ziniewicz

RETAIL Two coffee bars and an online shop

WHOLESALE CUSTOMERS 30 independent coffee shops, bakeries and restaurants

ROASTING OUTPUT 65,000 pounds in 2011

WEBSITE www.olympiacoffee.com



Oliver Stormshak and Sam Schroeder at Westside Cafe. | photo by Sarah Cass

continued on page 24 ►



Letter-pressed label. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.

Sam Schroeder originally wanted to be a high school teacher but soon found the allure of coffee too much to overcome. After working as a barista while attending Olympia's Evergreen State College, he joined Olympia Coffee Roasting in 2004 as its only employee. Over the years, Schroeder's responsibilities grew from blending and bagging roasted coffee to sourcing, roasting and delivering for the business.

At the time, Olympia Coffee Roasting was almost a hobby for original owners Tim Hunter and Terry Ziniewicz—"like a home brewer might read a book and start brewing beer," says Schroeder. Both had full-time jobs elsewhere, and they gave Schroeder plenty of freedom. He was a partner in the business for a short spell before deciding to leave in 2009.

His replacement? Stormshak, who had left Batdorf & Bronson and was roasting underground on a Diedrich HR-1 home roaster. "I was literally roasting coffee in my basement for a CSA [community-supported agriculture] project," he says. "I wanted to get my feelers out there and start roasting coffee how I felt it should be roasted, and sourcing coffee the way I felt it should be sourced."

During the transition, Stormshak and Schroeder worked together for a mere two months, but bonded quickly over their shared passion. "I never had a lot of training going in," says Schroeder. "When I worked with Oliver, I realized he had a clear picture of the direction he wanted to go with the coffee, and where the industry was going in general."

Stormshak was also intrigued by Schroeder's focus. "There were qualities in Sam I'd never seen in other people," he says. "He has an intense work ethic. He



Oliver Stormshak and Sam Schroeder in front of cupping. | photo by Sarah Cass

works until he gets it right and will try again and again and again. I just had so much respect for him."

When Stormshak was given the opportunity to purchase the company in 2010, he didn't hesitate to ask Schroeder to rejoin the company as retail director for Olympia's two cafes—one attached to



Oliver Stormshak roasting. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.

continued on page 26 ▶

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Olympia Coffee Roasting Co. flagship location, downtown Olympia. | photo by Daniel Thompson

the roastery and a second near Evergreen. A few weeks in, they were officially business partners. Sam's brother, Andrew, is also a partner and works behind the scenes on the company's books.

Rejuvenation

Stormshak started putting his imprint on the coffee program when he took over as roastmaster, but he really hit the accelerator once the sale was final. The partners closely followed the Specialty Coffee



At Olympia Coffee Roasting Co., every cup of coffee is brewed to order. | photo by Daniel Thompson

Association of America (SCAA) protocol: They began cupping all of their production coffees and sample roasts five cups at a time, counting physical defects on green coffees and comparing them to the original samples, and measuring the green moisture content of their coffees. "Everything just started to get tighter," says Stormshak.

Not even a month after he took over, Stormshak also began sourcing coffee at origin. He wasted no time in looking for farmers willing to go the extra mile in the pursuit of higher quality. "We talked about what sort of cherry selection we prefer, the drying percentages we need and the varieties we prefer in the cup," he says. "A little while later, we started manipulating the processing with certain producers—whether we wanted washed, honey or dry, or a coffee fermented to a certain percentage."

To qualify for Olympia's direct-trade program, a coffee must score at least 86, and the farmer must be open to discussing quality controls. Olympia also insists on full transparency on all sides, from farmers to importers/exporters to the roaster itself. "We all need to be profitable," says Stormshak. "That means all the information needs to be on the table for everyone to see, so no one is left out of the conversation." In exchange, Olympia agrees to pay at least 30 percent above fair-trade prices. In 2012, more than 50 percent of Olympia's coffees met the company's standards for direct trade.

Stormshak is the first to admit that running a direct-trade program is not easy for a company the size of Olympia, which roasted 65,000 pounds of



Oliver Stormshak roasting. | photo by Sarah Cass



Oliver Stormshak, Eugenia Ramirez and Luis Fallas of Farami, in Dota, Costa Rica. photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.



Producers Oscar Chacon and Francisca Chacon of La Mirella and Oliver Stormshak cupping together in Costa Rica. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.



Francisca Chacon, Oliver Stormshak and Oscar Chacon discuss harvest issues; Central Valley, Costa Rica. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.

coffee in 2011. "It's extremely challenging, and I don't necessarily recommend it for most small roasters," he says. How challenging? Stormshak estimates that half of Olympia's direct-trade projects failed in the first year. But he says facing challenges like these is part of Olympia's culture. "I have to get my hands involved in the procurement of our coffees. And I know I can't stop doing it, partially because I'm pretty much insane."

But when it does work, the results can be immensely satisfying. Olympia Coffee Roasting is now in its fourth year working with the Chacon family, which owns the La Mirella farm in Costa Rica. Throughout the relationship, the Chacons have been willing to experiment, including trying a new processing technique Oscar Chacon called mucilage fermentation, in which a coffee is fermented in its own mucilage juice after pulping.

"It was something completely new, and I didn't know they had done it," says Stormshak. "But we cupped the coffee when I was visiting, and I told him it was super exciting and interesting. And he said, 'Aha, I fermented it in its own mucilage!' It's so much fun working with them, because it's always interesting."

This past year, Olympia Coffee Roasting captured its sourcing values in an eight-minute video called "From the Source," a beautifully filmed mini-documentary that follows Stormshak to Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica. Shot by filmmaker Charley Voorhis, the video documents the hard work that goes into producing high-quality coffee. Stormshak says the video documents Olympia's coffee philosophy, which is that there's



Felipe Viteche of La Plata, Colombia, one of the highest-scoring microlot producers from direct-trade project in Colombia. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.



Pablo Zuniga is Olympia Coffee's most consistent microlot producer from direct-trade project in La Plata, Colombia. | photo courtesy of Olympia Coffee Roasting Co.

continued on page 28 ►

no secret or mystery to great coffee. It's not magic; it's effort.

"We want people to have a clear window on what's going on," Stormshak explains. "Once you start learning about coffee, you realize when you pick ripe coffee cherries, it tastes better and ferments more evenly. When you dry a coffee all the way, it's more stable in your roaster," he adds.

"We want customers to know who's behind our coffees, where they come from, and why they're so delicious."

Representation

Coffees don't sell themselves, of course. In Olympia Coffee Roasting's flagship cafe, which features large windows overlooking

the roastery, baristas highlight the uniqueness of the coffees by brewing them one at a time via the pour-over method. "We don't have any airpots, and we don't rush customers through," Sam Schroeder says. "Instead, we walk them through our process."

A customer who sits down at the cafe can expect to receive their coffee in a carafe accompanied by an empty mug and a glass of sparkling water. Olympia offers only traditional espresso drinks, which it serves on a tray with their own sparkling water sides. Because all of Olympia's coffees are seasonal, customers have plenty of opportunities to learn about new coffees, which the baristas happily encourage.

"Doing coffee by the cup changes the dialogue with our customers," Schroeder explains. "They instantly get what's going on. You can't just come in and order a 'coffee.' You'll either select a coffee from our offerings or we'll select a coffee that we think you'll enjoy."

Stormshak says customer service is a crucial part of the Olympia business model. "We realized that the best way to sell these amazing coffees is to be super-nice and humble to our customers and get to know them," he says. "When people relax and let down their guard, the experiences really blossom and open up."

The company also hosts weekly tastings that give customers and employees a chance to explore coffee from a different angle. Recent discussions include home-brewing methods, triangulation cuppings, direct-trade coffee tastings, iced coffee techniques and more.

Reclamation

While promoting sustainability at origin is one of Olympia's biggest priorities—more than 70 percent of the company's coffees are certified organic—it puts just as big an emphasis on homegrown responsibility.

Both of Olympia's cafes—the company also runs a 240-square-foot espresso bar near Evergreen State College—were largely built using salvaged and reclaimed materials. The flagship cafe features old-growth Douglas fir salvaged from a cold-storage warehouse in Tacoma, Wash.,

along with countertops reclaimed from an old barracks in Fort Lewis. In addition, the two cafes don't have traditional dumpsters; instead, they rely on a weekly pickup of 95-gallon and 65-gallon garbage carts. The owners estimate they divert more than 75 percent of Olympia's waste output from the landfill through a comprehensive composting and recycling program.

The company also promotes sustainable food and transportation systems within the community, sponsoring local events like a regional "Come to the Table" food summit and the annual Wrencher's Ball, at which local bike mechanics provide free safety tune-ups to cyclists participating in the Thurston County Bicycle Commuter Contest.

One of the company's newest innovations is compostable retail packaging made from 100 percent reused burlap coffee sacks and recycled paper. The bag includes directions on how to rip off the tin tie, which is the only part of the bag that's non-compostable. The label is unique, as well. Designed for easy removal, it includes origin information on the backside—including the stories of people who own the farm—along with a section for tasting notes.

"You can say why you love this coffee, or keep track of how you brew it," explains Stormshak. "Everything's dated, so you can get as geeky as you want with it."

Recognition

Although Stormshak and Sam Schroeder are grateful for their success, they're eager to spread the credit beyond their office doors. "We wouldn't be able to get as nerdy as we are, or achieve the things we're able to achieve, without our staff members," Schroeder says. "We're all into different things and have different hobbies, but we're all passionate about coffee."

That passion is expected to carry Olympia Coffee Roasting into the future, as it opens a third retail store, grows its wholesale business and, most importantly, continues pursuing outstanding coffees.

"We're going to keep buying the best coffees we can buy, roast them the best we can, and prepare them the best we can," Schroeder explains. It's a pretty sweet picture for a couple of sugar-obsessed coffee nerds.

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Macro Roaster of the Year on page 30

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