

#shestheroaster Increasing Gender Equity in the Roasting Community

by Mandy Spirito

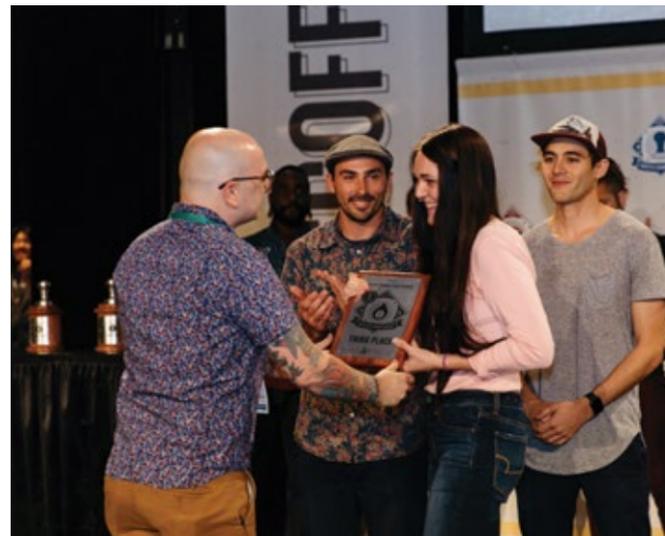
Photos courtesy of the Specialty Coffee Association

When you think of a coffee roaster, what's the first image that comes to mind? It's likely a bearded guy with a flannel shirt, maybe a beanie, standing next to a roaster with a straight-out-of-Kinfolk serious expression on his face.

Silly caricatures aside—admittedly, I have more than a few flannel shirts in my closet—the truth is that roasting positions are typically held by men who benefit more from that visibility than their female peers. If you talk to most female roasters, they'll likely have some stories about roadblocks they faced on their career paths. Queer women and women of color are likely to experience even more roadblocks. Most times, it's subconscious bias that creates these roadblocks, but even if it's unintentional, this bias means an incredible pool of talent is being overlooked.

I myself have faced a few setbacks in becoming a roaster. When I started working in specialty coffee, I thought it would be easy to break into it—the shop I worked at was growing rapidly and the owners discussed needing another roaster. I was immediately met with a roadblock, however, one that many women hear: “You're too tiny,” the owners told me. “You're 5 feet 2 inches tall and you weigh less than a bag of coffee. We need someone a little stronger.”

I didn't find my opportunity, or even meet a female roaster, until I moved to San Francisco. During the first few months that I lived there, I met many talented female roasters, a lot of them the same size and stature as me, and it didn't hinder their ability as



Evocation Coffee's Taylor Gresham took third place at the national U.S. Roaster Championship this year.

roasters in the slightest. The women I met at that stage in my career helped and encouraged me, giving me that extra push to succeed. That mentorship and sense of community was instrumental to my professional growth. That sense of community should be accessible



LEFT Mandy Spirito is director of coffee at Halfwit Coffee Roasters and serves on the Roasters Guild Competitions Committee. **RIGHT** Roasters Guild Executive Council member Jen Apodaca would like to see more female roasters taking on volunteer leadership positions in the industry. “These visible roles are extremely powerful and can inspire people to action,” she says.

to everyone, not just coffee professionals lucky enough to live in major cities.

The 2016 U.S. Roaster Championship saw 40 competitors; all of them were men. Hoping to find a way to encourage a more diverse pool of participants for the 2017 competition, the Roasters Guild Events Committee, with the help of the Specialty Coffee Association, created the #shestheroaster hashtag.

In addition to increasing diversity within the competition, the Events Committee wanted to provide a social media platform for female-identifying roasters to connect, network and support each other. Jen Apodaca, who chairs the Roasters Guild Competitions Committee, would like to see more talented female roasters taking on volunteer leadership positions in the industry—as lead instructors, for example, or committee chairs.

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Female coffee professionals gathered for a photo at the Roasters Guild Retreat in 2016.

"There are several women who do amazing amounts of critical work behind the scenes," she says, "but we also need to have women in visible leadership roles as well. These visible roles are extremely powerful and can inspire people to action."

The 2017 U.S. Roaster Championship saw the most diverse group of competitors yet. Brian Gomez, operations manager at The Roasted Bean in San Dimas, California, was the first wheelchair user to compete in the roasting competition. Taylor Gresham, head roaster at Evocation Coffee in Amarillo, Texas, took third place at nationals; she was one of six female roasters who competed this year. While this is a great start, there's a lot more work to do as we continue to push for inclusion and diversity.

We need to be open about discussing the need for more diversity in order to create opportunities that allow new and aspiring roasters to network with leaders in the industry. When you see people who look like you in leadership roles, it's easier to visualize yourself as a leader, or even just a member of the community.

Regarding the success of the #shestheroaster campaign in increasing diversity at the 2017 competition, Apodaca says, "It truly is inspiring, but we have to do more than just post pictures. We need to have conversations and network with those who are going to be future leaders in the industry."

Apodaca collaborated with Joanna Alm of Drop Coffee in Sweden and Talor Browne of Talor & Jørgen in Norway to hold #shestheroaster events at the Roasters Guild Retreat in Atlanta in August and the Roaster Camp in Poland in October.

"They're intended to be events that are safe spaces for female-identifying persons and allies to explore career opportunities in roasting," she says. "If you're a barista who has always wanted to roast but continues to run into roadblocks, please come to one of these events and do not give up! There is an entire community of people that want to help you!"

Anyone can plan events in their region to bring together female roasters—not only to compete, but to encourage each other, promote mentorship, and push toward a more inclusive future for the roasting community. Promoting diversity with a hashtag is just the beginning.



MANDY SPIRITO has been in the specialty coffee industry for 10 years, focusing on roasting and quality control. She is currently director of coffee at Halfwit Coffee Roasters in Chicago. Spirito has worked as a judge for the U.S. Roaster Championship and the Good Food Awards, and currently serves on the Roasters Guild Competitions Committee.

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