

roast



M A G A Z I N E

2014 Micro Roaster of the Year



The staff of Pilot Coffee Roasters. | photo courtesy of Pilot Coffee Roasters

Pilot Coffee Roasters

Micro Roaster of the YEAR



Coffee cupping in the lab at Pilot Coffee Roasters.
photo courtesy of Pilot Coffee Roasters

New Zealanders have long been fixated on coffee culture, with extra emphasis on the culture.

Cafes are found on almost every street corner, and you can be sure that most afternoon teas were preceded with a ristretto or two served up by your friendly neighborhood barista.

But as easy as it is to find a carefully crafted macchiato or “flat white”—New Zealand’s version of a cappuccino but milkier—it can be almost as hard to come across a good pour-over brew.

So when Andy Wilkin and his wife Jessie—a native Canadian—left New Zealand for Toronto to open a coffee roaster, he knew he’d have some adjusting to do.

“Coffee’s a bit different over there,” he explains. “The average quality is fantastic, but it’s very espresso based. New Zealanders are just as passionate about the product, but we’re more sophisticated in North America in terms of the coffee itself and our brewing methods.”

Andy and Jessie learned their lessons well with Pilot Coffee Roasters, *Roast’s* Micro Roaster of the Year. Launched in 2009, Pilot has helped transform Toronto from a city “where it was hard to get a really good cup of coffee,” as Andy puts it, to a city with a burgeoning coffee culture of its own, rife with high-end micro roasters and quality-minded coffee shops. Pilot brews up a blend of ethical coffee served in your choice of drip, French press, pour-over or siphoned style, and, of course, espresso that would warm a Kiwi’s heart.

“When we started, there weren’t too many—or any, really—micro roasters in Toronto that were pushing the limits,” Andy says. “We wanted to take it in a new direction.”

That means not only sourcing and roasting the highest-quality coffees, but also constantly seeking ways to improve—whether by investing time and energy in extra barista training or showing consumers the best way to brew.

“If we’re not adding value to our customers every day, we’re going backwards,” Andy says. “So we’re constantly racking our brains for ways to improve the customer experience—by sharing knowledge, consulting on quality or providing the brewing resources customers need to make a better cup of coffee.”

“If everyone’s doing well, we have to do it better.”

One of Andy’s favorite recent innovations is Pilot’s cold-brew system. “Rather than doing a standard cold brew, we stepped back and asked how we could do it different,” he says. “So we worked with Chris Chekan, our head of product innovation, to strip down the elements of brewing beer and then relate it back to coffee.” Unlike other cold-brew methods, Pilot’s brew uses an initial hot-water pre-infuse to bring out the fine points, followed by a cold-water quench and 16-hour, full-immersion extraction to provide sweetness and body.

The cold brew, which is filtered down to 1 micron, is served on a nitro tap to preserve the qualities of the coffee. “It’s really something to experience, and we developed it entirely through trial and error,” he says.

An Emphasis on Education

Pilot roasts out of a new, state-of-the-art facility in Toronto’s Leslieville neighborhood. Equipped with a 24-kilo Diedrich IR-24 roaster; a soundproof, glass-walled cupping lab; an Agtron roast analyzer; and a

THE WINNER’S STATS

ESTABLISHED 2009

LOCATION Toronto, Canada

EMPLOYEES 22

LEADERSHIP Andy Wilkin, co-founder and green bean buyer; Jessie Wilkin, co-founder; Rob Wilkin, co-owner

RETAIL LOCATIONS Two

ROASTERS (MACHINES) Diedrich IR-24

ROASTING OUTPUT 93,000 pounds in 2012

WEBSITE www.pilotcoffee.roasters.com



Head roaster Chris Noseworthy (middle) and co-founder Andy Wilkin (right) with producer Gloria Rodriguez at Nejava in El Salvador. | photo courtesy of Pilot Coffee Roasters

green bean moisture reader, the facility is custom built for the quality-minded roaster.

Prior to opening the facility, Pilot roasted its coffees in its cafe headquarters, but opened the new roasting facility in part to give the public a more complete picture of the roasting process. This Pilot “hub,” as Andy and Jessie are calling it, is the first roasting facility in Toronto that’s open and accessible to the public. Not only is there a dedicated space for cupping and brewing workshops, but the public can also gain insights from watching the roasters at work.

Pilot was also one of the first Toronto roasters to hold regular brewing demonstrations for customers, which Andy believes is critical to the company’s continued success. “We want to get people involved with hands-on training, so they understand that coffee is not just coffee,” Andy says. “If you can make them more aware of what they’re drinking and why it tastes better, you’ll build stronger loyalty.”

To emphasize that point, Pilot also recently released a series of videos that illustrate coffee’s journey from farm to cup. Filmed by a professional crew, the videos follow Andy to origin to capture the different stages of sourcing, and then head back to Toronto to film Pilot’s roasters and baristas performing their craft.

Among Pilot’s “not just coffee” selection is a handful of blends, including the company’s workhorse Big Bro espresso blend, a syrupy, full-bodied espresso with a dark-chocolate finish, and its counterpart Elevens espresso blend, which offers a sweeter flavor with higher acidity and a lighter, silkier mouthfeel than Big Bro.

Pilot complements its blends with a number of single-origin coffees, including recent favorites Finca El Quizarra from Costa Rica and La Bolsa La Huerta from Guatemala. As is common in the specialty roasting arena, Andy is also slowly but surely adding a number of direct-trade coffees to the mix.



In the Pilot cafe.
photo courtesy of Fogel Photography

He says it’s not easy for a roaster of his size to establish direct-trade relationships with farmers—Pilot roasted 93,000 pounds of coffee last year—but the payoff is worth it.

“It’s much more complicated than I anticipated,” he says. “It takes me away from my family three or four weeks out of the year, and the travel is expensive. But what you bring back is so valuable that it’s hard to put a dollar value on it.”

As important as it is for Pilot to educate customers, Andy says it’s every bit as essential for Pilot’s roasters to learn how changes on the farm level can impact the coffees they roast. One of Andy’s most illustrative forays into direct trade came during a visit to a farm in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, where the farmer wet-milled his beans and dried them on a small rooftop patio. Although the coffee cupped well, Andy noticed a chimney stack on the roof that stood relatively low.

“Normally I keep quiet on things like that,” he says. “But I threw out the idea that the smoke might be affecting the flavor of the coffee. So I offered to pay a bit more for the coffee to replace the stack. I bought the farm’s coffee again this year, and it’s cupping better.”

Some growers are even becoming as data-obsessive as roasters, recording even the smallest details in the search for issues that might affect quality. “One of our producers in Costa Rica produces around 400 bags a year on about 60 or 70 lots,” Andy says. “That’s exciting. He’s recording data on how each lot is milled and what the impediments were, and then also cups them all.”

“I’m really interested in what happens during processing and how,” he continues. “Why does the coffee taste so good? Was it sitting on the patio for an extra day? Was there more wind? It’s fascinating to me.”

Building Local Connections

While building sustainable relationships at origin is a priority for Pilot, the company puts just as big an emphasis on creating sustainable communities at home. For example, a courier named Bradley Wentworth delivers coffee to Pilot’s Toronto-based retail customers on a custom bike capable of hauling up to 265 pounds of cargo (120 kilograms), helping reduce the company’s carbon emissions.

Pilot also pays a premium for clean energy through Bullfrog Power, which sources



Brett Johnston competing at the 2012 Eastern Regional Barista Championship. | photo courtesy Pilot Coffee Roasters



Coffee cupping in the lab at Pilot Coffee Roasters.
photo courtesy Pilot Coffee Roasters



Barista jam event. | photo courtesy Pilot Coffee Roasters



Co-founder Andy Wilkin and a direct-trade lot from Brazil.
photo courtesy Pilot Coffee Roasters



Courier Bradley Wentworth delivers coffee to Pilot’s Toronto-based customers. | photo courtesy Pilot Coffee Roasters

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Co-founder Andy Wilkin in Guatemala. | photo courtesy of Navin Ramaswaran



Co-founder Andy Wilkin (right) in Guatemala. | photo courtesy of Navin Ramaswaran

power exclusively from regional wind and hydro facilities certified as low impact by Environment Canada. The roasting operation does its part by using Diedrich infrared afterburners and catalytic oxidizers, which they credit as being 50 to 60 percent more energy efficient and cleaner burning than other afterburners on the market.

Pilot's two retail cafes, however, are where the company's community-minded ethos really comes together. The cafes embrace an industrial-chic design that's a marked contrast to the living-room vibe of many coffee chains, with a bare wood bar, Mason jar lights, brushed concrete floors and high ceilings. Customers come from all over the city to sample the coffees at the cafes, Te Aro and Crafted, and to witness the Wilkins' coffee competitions.

In 2012, in partnership with Toronto roaster Reunion Island, the company launched the Barista Olympics, in which baristas from throughout the city get together to show off their skills. "Sometimes the coffee industry can get a little too serious," Andy says. "So we made the

competition very casual and fun—with a little alcohol involved to loosen everyone up." Baristas competed in events such as a one-handed cappuccino-making contest, in which partners had to team up to make drinks using one arm each.

Pilot has also hosted annual Espresso Throwdowns the past two years, featuring espresso from around the world. The first event brought in espressos from roasters in New Zealand and Australia, while the second hosted espressos from several of Europe's top roasters.

Andy says the events help Pilot connect with people in the community beyond serving them their morning coffees. "We had about 200 people at the Barista Olympics and a line out the door," he says. "It was absolutely packed. And it gives us an opportunity to donate to a great cause." This year's Espresso Throwdown was also packed wall to wall, with all proceeds going to Coffee Kids, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the livelihoods of coffee-farming families.

As the barista competitions and cupping workshops add up, the Toronto coffee

community is coming into its own—which delights the man who essentially grew up drinking espresso and counted a dozen micro roasters in his neighborhood in New Zealand.

"Consumers are responding, absolutely," says Andy. "We're lucky. We're in a great neighborhood, where the awareness of quality coffee is more intense. But we're also seeing so many shops and roasters pushing the boundaries. You see the same thing in cities like Portland and San Francisco—districts where great roasters are clustered together."

So with the industry changing so dramatically, what does Andy see in Pilot's future? "We just want to keep sharing our love for coffee and continuing to build a stronger foundation for sourcing, roasting and delivering great products," he says. "I don't know where we'll end up, but we'll be serving great coffee, I can tell you that."



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Pilot Coffee roastery—a view into the coffee cupping and training lab. photo courtesy of Fogel Photography



A view of Pilot Coffee's green coffee and packing line. photo courtesy of Fogel Photography