

roast



M A G A Z I N E

2016 Macro Roaster of the Year



The Crimson Cup team gathers around "Godzilla," the company's 325-pound Roure roaster from Spain. | photo courtesy of EclipseCorp

Crimson Cup Coffee & Tea

Macro Roaster of the YEAR



Coffee buyer and trainer Brandon Bir. | photo courtesy of Jennifer Marie Barry Photography

THE WINNER'S STATS

ESTABLISHED 1991

LOCATION Columbus, Ohio

EMPLOYEES 25

LEADERSHIP Greg Ubert, founder and president; Melissa Rogner, marketing director; Dave Eldridge and Brandon Bir, coffee buyers

RETAIL LOCATIONS Two, with a third set to open in December

ROASTERS (MACHINES) Two Probat L125 named Hansel and Gretel, and one 325-pound Roure named Godzilla

ROASTING OUTPUT 485,000 pounds per year

WEBSITE www.crimsoncup.com



Dave Eldridge (left) and Greg Ubert (right) visit with a coffee farmer in Guatemala. | photo courtesy of Crimson Cup

Describing a traditional coffee supply chain is anything but poetic.

With words like cultivation, processing, transportation, distribution and consumption, the narrative is straight out of a Logistics 101 textbook.

At Crimson Cup Coffee & Tea in Columbus, Ohio, such descriptions are only part of the story. To founder and president Greg Ubert and the rest of his crew of coffee fanatics, the supply chain is also about something far more human—community.

“We want to close the gap from the grower all the way to the consumer,” says Dave Eldridge, a coffee buyer for the company. “That means creating a supply chain of mutual benefit, where we all understand each other and represent each other’s intentions honestly and openly. Whether it’s a grower in Nicaragua striving to produce a great crop, an independent coffeehouse that wants to prepare terrific coffee, or a consumer who wants to learn more about the coffee they’re drinking, we want to complete the circle so everyone feels engaged within the same community.”

Now in its 24th year, *Roast’s* 2016 Macro Roaster of the Year has evolved into a powerful advocate for the local, national and international specialty coffee communities. Its independent coffeehouse program—buttressed by Ubert’s book, *7 Steps to Success: A Common Sense Guide to Succeed in Specialty Coffee*—helps roughly a dozen new coffee shops each year learn the ins and outs of the coffee industry, from business basics to marketing to cafe layout to new brewing methods.

Crimson Cup supports communities at origin through its Friend2Farmer direct trade program, which currently works with small-plot farmers in Peru, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Brazil and Costa Rica. As part of this commitment, the company has fostered relationships between select Friend2Farmer growers and college students from the Columbus area, who contribute to local educational and health initiatives while learning about smallholder farming practices.

The roaster is doing its part to help local consumers learn more about the beverage they love, too, by telling the stories of the farmers who produce their coffee, and by introducing new ways to enjoy the beverage—including a series of nitro cold brews.

It’s all part of how Crimson Cup lives up to its philosophy of “Leaving You Feeling Energized,” or LYFE for short.

Energized by Education

Like many coffee entrepreneurs, Ubert didn’t have coffee in mind when he started his career.

“My first job out of college was in computer software in Chicago,” he says, “but then I found out I couldn’t fall in love with computer software.”

Having learned at an early age to appreciate diverse foods and flavors, he decided on a career change while sitting in a coffee shop in Los Gatos, California.

“By the time I finished my cup, I thought, ‘Why not coffee?’” he recalls, “and I started to get really excited about the possibilities.”

Ubert opened Crimson Cup Coffee & Tea in 1991, relying on the support of his colleagues in the specialty coffee industry to learn the business from the ground up. Education quickly became a priority—and a differentiator.

“I asked a bunch of different roasters at a show in Atlanta to tell me what they do best,” Ubert says, “and they all said roughly the same thing: ‘We roast the best coffee and here’s how we do it.’ There’s nothing wrong with that, of course, but our mission is to go beyond brewing great coffee, and teach our

customers how to be successful in business as well.”

Through its 7 Steps to Success franchise-alternative program, Crimson Cup provides everything a new business owner needs to start a successful coffeehouse, without any franchise fees or royalties. Businesses are selected for participation based on their commitment to excellence and their fit with the Crimson Cup philosophy. While there are no fees associated with joining the program, partners purchase coffee, coffee shop products and equipment from the company during initial setup.

“A new coffeehouse owner is giving up a lot,” says Eldridge, “possibly their life savings and a secure job. They’re having to show up early and stay late. It’s pretty scary. Our coffee program is designed around the needs of this particular person.”

Elements of the program include choosing the right location, developing a solid business plan, creating a labor-efficient space, getting the right products and equipment and creating a welcoming culture. Crimson Cup also provides training for coffee shop owners and staff, and marketing materials and point-of-sale displays. A consultant remains onsite through opening day to ensure a successful launch. In addition to the more formal franchise-alternative program, the company offers a series of free webinars on coffee industry basics, providing a way for potential business owners to get specific questions answered.

In keeping with its commitment to education, Crimson Cup has partnered with local universities on a number of coffee-focused programs. For the past three years, the company has sponsored service learning trips to Honduras, where students learn about the seed-to-cup journey of some of the coffee served on their campuses. Student coffee clubs have a standing invitation to Crimson Cup’s cupping laboratory, and the roaster has worked with university foodservice groups to present cuppings and workshops for students.

Crimson Cup’s partnership with Ohio State University led to the development of a new campus cafe that serves only direct trade coffee traceable to individual farmers from around the world. Called Connecting Grounds, the cafe features a brew bar with limited-time offerings of microlot coffees and hosts educational events and discussions. Students who have participated in trips to origin share their experiences with peers, and events—such as Skype sessions with coffee farmers to mark new microlot releases—highlight the coffee supply chain. To showcase the contributions

of growers, roasters and baristas, space is dedicated to cupping, roasting and beverage preparation.

Consumer education also is key to the Crimson Cup philosophy. Along with helping its 7 Steps to Success partners learn how to engage customers in the stories of farmers, optimal brewing methods and more, the company presents a series of classes for consumers in its home market of Columbus, Ohio, on topics ranging from coffee origins to cupping to pour-over brewing. Consumer education opportunities will expand significantly with the opening of a new cupping and training lab later this year.

“Consumers have the opportunity to cast their economic vote however they choose,” says Eldridge, “so it’s important for us to close the gap between growers and consumers, because we know these farmers personally, and we know what our support means to them.”

Energized by Relationships

Crimson Cup Coffee & Tea launched its Friend2Farmer program in 2011 with coffees from the mountain village of El Socorro de la Peñita in Honduras. Like so much of Crimson Cup’s business, honesty was the foundation of this partnership—setting a tone for the roaster’s subsequent direct trade relationships.

“They really sat down and told us what their problems and needs were when we showed up to make coffee purchase agreements,” Eldridge says. “They brought a level of openness and communication to the relationship from the start. That’s what drives us to seek and value these relationships in general.”

Crimson Cup has worked closely with El Socorro to boost consistency in growing and processing methods, and the trips the company has sponsored for students have resulted in a number of community improvements. In 2014, the students brought and assembled six nebulizer machines to help local medical workers treat respiratory illnesses. This year, students helped local community leader and wet mill owner David Lopez build a solar dryer, giving local farmers greater control over the coffee drying process.

“We’re honest with the growers about what we want, and we’re honest with consumers about how their purchases may help these communities,” says Brandon Bir, a coffee buyer and trainer for Crimson Cup. “If someone’s honest with us, it’s a great foundation for an ongoing relationship.”



The Crimson Cup roasting team (clockwise from back left): Coffee quality technician Chris Shegitz, roastmaster Dave Rochus, coffee buyer and trainer Brandon Bir, and coffee buyer Dave Eldridge. *photo courtesy of EclipseCorp*



Roastmaster Dave Rochus is passionate about handcrafted coffee. | *photo courtesy of Crimson Cup*



Crimson Cup craft coffee bags. | *photo courtesy of EclipseCorp*



Crimson Cup staffers Taylor Harvey (third from left) and Brandon Bir (third from right) cup coffees with partners in Peru. | *photo courtesy of Crimson Cup*

Guatemala is home to one of Crimson Cup’s newest Friend2Farmer relationships. A group of 20 small farmers from the town of Olopa in eastern Guatemala banded together to market their coffee through a regional co-op.

“We were the first American roaster to consider establishing direct trade [with the co-op], and they rolled out the red carpet,” Eldridge says. “They were as excited to meet our buyers as we were to experience their coffee and hospitality. The reigning Miss Olopa even presented a PowerPoint about the community.”

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LEFT Coffee buyer Dave Eldridge enjoys a coffee break. **MIDDLE** The Modbar at Crimson Cup's Upper Arlington coffeehouse showcases a steady rotation of microlot coffees. **RIGHT** Greg Ubert (center) with coffee growers in Olopa, Guatemala. | photos courtesy of Crimson Cup

Every direct trade relationship takes time to develop. Some start with promise but fizzle over time, but the ones that do pan out are energizing.

"We're like many other macro roasters, where just 12 years ago the thought of going to Honduras or Peru was kind of a dream," says Bir, "but now it's growing and becoming a big part of who we are. I expect to see a massive change in the inventory of the coffee we offer in the next few years, as we develop more and more of these relationships."

In addition to these carefully cultivated relationships, Crimson Cup still plans to offer coffees from other channels, including fair trade and traditional importers.

"If an importer sends a sample and it's stupid good, we'll carry that coffee along with other roasters," Bir says, "but our balance may change."

While relationships at origin are a key aspect of Crimson Cup's business model, relationships closer to home also are important. The company has long supported local and national charities—including the Cancer Support Community of Central Ohio, See Kids Dream, and active U.S. military personnel and veterans—with coffee, cash and volunteer hours. In June 2014, the roaster took a deeper dive when it partnered with a company founded by disabled veterans to launch Charlie Foxtrot Coffee, a brand designed "to support, honor and thank America's warriors, veterans and their families." For every \$10 bag sold, the brand donates \$1 to Fallen 15, a local nonprofit that honors and celebrates the lives of fallen Ohio service members who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The company's commitment to community turned hyper-local earlier this year, when the spouse of one of its employees was diagnosed with brain cancer. To support the family, Crimson Cup organized a team to compete in the American Brain Tumor Association's Breakthrough for Brain Tumors 5K race, raising more than \$1,000 for brain tumor research,

education and support for patients and caregivers.

Energized by Innovation

In addition to its wholesale accounts—which include more than 350 coffeehouses, specialty grocers, colleges and universities, and foodservice operations—Crimson Cup operates two retail locations, with a third set to open by the end of 2015.

When the company opened its second location in June 2015, it augmented the "fast" side of the shop with a side dedicated to the slow enjoyment of coffee. The slow bar includes such features as a Modbar pour-over counter that rotates offerings from several microlots, multiple cold-brew coffees on nitrogen taps, and even coffee cocktails infused with ingredients like chamomile and lavender.

Pairing the fast and slow bars allows Crimson Cup to serve a broader range of consumers, Bir notes.

"Some people want a vanilla latte fast, but others ask for a light-roasted coffee," he explains. "The latter is an opportunity to bring them over to the slow side of the business and explain what we do."

"It's set up in a way to make them ask questions," Eldridge adds. "They want to know what's going on—'You guys are hopping nitro coffee?'—and when you build those types of relationships, you create brand ambassadors."

Even before the slow bar opened, the company was focused on innovation in brewing and serving. When the roaster began cold brewing in 2013, it introduced refillable 32-ounce glass growlers for home consumption. The following year, Crimson Cup's innovation team—Eldridge, Bir and coffee quality technician Chris Shegitz—came up with several new cold-brew creations.

They began by dispensing cold-brewed Ethiopian Sidamo Kellenso through a nitrogen tap system into an imperial stout glass, resulting in a frothy drink with the mouthfeel

of a stout. With a background in beer brewing, Eldridge suggested they add hops to the mix, which led to a series of experiments to find the ideal balance of coffee and hops. For the holidays, Bir brewed a Holiday Hopped Nitro, based on a spiced winter beer recipe, and in February 2015, the company introduced Cocoa Nib Nitro, which combines coffee, cocoa and vanilla beans to produce a slightly sweet, frothy drink.

Energized by Momentum

After nearly a quarter-century in business, Crimson Cup continues to grow and innovate. In May 2015, the roaster's independent coffeehouse program welcomed its first international customer—Columbus Coffee House in Dhaka, Bangladesh—launched by foreign exchange students who grew to love Crimson Cup while studying in Ohio.

Perhaps most exciting is the new, state-of-the-art cupping and training laboratory the company is set to open in December. Built to Specialty Coffee Association of America standards, the facility will house a classroom, application lab, cupping lab, roasting lab and employee cafe.

Through it all, Crimson Cup has maintained a tight focus on its vision of a mutually beneficial supply chain—one that enriches the entire coffee community.

"That's the overall goal of our coffee program at all times," Eldridge says. "We're buying great coffee, we want our customers to prepare great coffee that represents the grower's intention, and we want consumers to learn about it and enjoy it. That's why it's so much fun for us."



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