



Simon Craven-Thompson (l) stands with Mike Nuwagaba, who was the head of the Rwandan cupping jury, at the 2008 Rwanda Cup of Excellence.

Brewing up a Cup of Excellence

Simon Craven-Thompson Gets JURY DUTY in Rwanda

by Blythe Thimsen

ROOSTERS CROWING, ALARM CLOCKS ringing and the sun rising may start the wake-up process, but when it comes to truly peeling those eyelids open and getting a jumpstart on the day, for many people there is only one substance to which to turn: coffee.

Whether it is brewed in a Mr. Coffee®, pressed in a French Press, or delivered as a shot of espresso, millions of people across the country depend on the dark bean to give them their get-up-and-go in the morning.

How much thought goes into the coffee that you drink? If you are like a lot of people who stand bleary-eyed at the kitchen counter early each morning, waiting to fill their cup with the hot beverage, there isn't much thought, just an intense appreciation.

Truth be told, though, the journey from bean to beverage is a long and difficult one that results in a luxury product being deliv-

ered into china cups and travel mugs alike. Two people who know and understand the value of coffee are Simon Craven-Thompson and his wife, Becky Templin.

In April of 1993, Craven-Thompson and Templin started Cravens Coffee in Spokane. "Coffee carts were becoming popular in Seattle," says Templin. "Being in the food and beverage industry, we saw that people were interested in coffee" and that it was an area where there was room to explore. To gain experience specifically with coffee, Templin worked at an espresso stand while Craven-Thompson went to work for Seattle's Best Coffee Company.

"Seattle's Best Coffee gave us a platform, a great education to start from," says Craven-Thompson. "We had the right mentality for owning a business, and coffee had grabbed me." Ready for a change, they decided to step

out on a limb and start their own business. "We were just young enough and brave enough – or stupid enough, depends on how you look at it – to do this on our own," he says of their venture into the realm of coffee. "We wanted to have truly the best coffee. We decided if we went out of business we'd go out swinging for the fences."

When it came time to select a location for Cravens Coffee, Craven-Thompson and Templin looked at Atlanta and Minneapolis, considering them cities that mirrored Seattle. When neither of these cities felt like a good fit, they turned to Spokane and discovered a city that was a hit.

"People adopted us," says Craven-Thompson, referring to the reception they got when the first Cravens Coffee location opened on the corner of 1st and Cedar. "They were enthralled with what we were doing. People had warned us of the 'Old Boy Network' in Spokane, that we would not be accepted as outsiders, but we never felt that."

The Spokane lifestyle is one reason Cravens has stayed in Spokane as it grew. "The lifestyle was a great surprise, a hidden treasure," says Craven-Thompson. Additionally, the quality of workers in Spokane stood out as a benefit. "There is a good supply of people who want to work hard. I am amazed at the quality of the worker. We have a core of people with a great work ethic."

"The Spokane market really accepted us," says Templin. "There were a handful of people who understood from the beginning what we were about. Our timing was right, too. Look at all of the drive-through espresso stands and restaurants with gourmet coffee. We were the third roaster in town and now there are fourteen."

In a market like Spokane, where there is no shortage of drive-through coffee stands, it may seem as though coffee is an overdone product with no room for new competition. Cravens has blossomed, however, growing to over 800 accounts from Central Washington to Bozeman, Montana. They also have an office and warehouse in Western Colorado that handles accounts from Aspen to Telluride. "There is always room for a better mousetrap," says Craven-Thompson. "If someone can do it better there is always room. I thought we were on a roll from the start. We had a few blips, but the successes far outweighed the blips."

From the radio commercials with his easily recognizable English accent, to his visage on the Cravens Coffee packaging, Craven-Thompson has become somewhat of a local celebrity. "I'm a reluctant famous person," he says. "Coffee roasters usually want to be rock stars. To me it's not that, it's about the coffee, building the brand."

"He was reluctant to do that," says Templin of Craven-Thompson's desire – or lack thereof – to be the face of Cravens Coffee. "But we are creating something that we know who is behind it. We're more accountable. I always thought people relate to people," she says. "People see Simon and there is a trust element. They think, 'this is a coffee you should drink, because Simon recommends it.'"



A river of peled coffee cherries - the fruit from which a coffee bean comes - makes for a beautiful sight.

Craven-Thompson likes to let that attention fall elsewhere. "Simon is likely to put the spotlight on the people who do the farming," says Templin. "He may be a reluctant celebrity, but it is secondary to what he can do to help these people."

"There are hundreds of people behind producing a single pound of coffee," says Craven-Thompson. Getting people to understand the work and effort that go into producing that cup of coffee you have each morning is something of a passion for him. Because of the amount of work and the

number of people involved, Craven-Thompson wants people to recognize that coffee is indeed a luxury drink. Luxury, however, comes at a price.

In the beginning, Craven-Thompson often heard people say that if his product wasn't the cheapest in Spokane, no one would buy it. The success of the company has proved this train of thought wrong. "We are a bit of an anomaly," he says. "We are not the cheapest, we are strictly wholesale, and yet we are very successful."

One reason they are not the cheapest is because they pay a higher rate for their beans, in order to provide an honest wage to the growers. "We pay for that," he says of the extra cost for the coffee they purchase. "It has to meet our specifications. We pay a very sustainable price that allows everyone to live well."

This description touches on the concept of fair trade, which is often associated with coffee. "One reason fair trade needed to happen is because there is a constant downward pressure on the cost of coffee," says Craven-Thompson. "It is the cheapest luxury drink there is. A cup of coffee can cost a dollar at a restaurant, and 250 people have touched it. It is grown in remote areas where there is no infrastructure and where there are all sorts of concerns, from health concerns – when you are 6,000 feet up a mountain in Ethiopia and something happens to a worker, there is not much that can be done – to climate concerns and more."

Despite all the work and time that goes into growing and harvesting coffee (it takes five years for a coffee plant to be ready to produce its first crop), the fact that there are limited and remote locations in which it grows, and the amount of hands-on work needed to get the beans from the plant to the bag (each bean has to be hand-picked and peeled), coffee is sold for relatively inexpensive prices. "The most perfectly prepared cup of coffee is at most a couple of bucks," says Craven-Thompson. "The great story is that you can have the best cup of coffee and it costs less than a bottle of water."

Finding the beans to create that best cup of coffee involves a lot of trust and verification according to Craven-Thompson. "You can trust the information you get, but you must go there; there is a lot of verification that has to happen. You can have the most romantic name in the world, but bad stuff – child labor, banned fertilizer, etc., can be used to create that. You have to go to the farms and verify that the coffee that is being produced is something people can trust and is of value for them."

In order to assure the coffee purchased by Cravens Coffee is of the utmost quality, Craven-Thompson works to cultivate strong relationships with the farmers from whom he buys coffee. They purchase from the Palmaras Co-op in Costa Rica, where they were given a key to the city as a sign of the respect the region has for them.

Building those relationships not only ensures that Cravens Coffee has the highest quality product to offer customers here in Spokane, but it has garnered some international attention for Craven-Thompson himself. This past summer he was invited to be a juror at the 2008 Cup of Excellence in Rwanda.

Cup of Excellence was founded by the Alliance for Coffee Excellence in 1999 as a



ABOVE: Simon performs his juror duty, as he prepares for the cupping process at the 2008 Rwanda Cup of Excellence.

RIGHT: Simon stands at an African drying table while in Rwanda for the Cup of Excellence. Note the light color of the coffee beans. This is what a coffee bean looks like before it has been roasted.

competition for farmers to enter their coffee in, and to elevate the status of coffee internationally. The competition selects the best coffees from a region, while building both the reputation of the source country and relationships between the producing and consuming countries.

Only twenty-two individuals were invited to be jurors for the 2008 Rwandan Cup of Excellence. This is the kind of jury duty that you want to get if you are in the coffee industry. One must be asked to be a juror, and there is a waiting list of 45 people who hope to be asked in the future. "We are known by Cup of Excellence as being true specialty roasters," says Craven-Thompson, describing the reputation of Cravens Coffee in the international coffee community. "I had a geopolitical interest in what had happened there," he says of Rwanda, which he first visited in 2006. "To be on the jury was a big deal."

During the event there are over 50 coffees that qualify to be cupped and scored over a four-day period. Cupping coffee involves "slurping and chewing the coffee." As the different coffees are cupped, defective ones are eliminated. Coffees that make the final round are considered clean and sweet; have high quality individual attributes, such as acidity and mouth-feel; and possess attributes that work well together.

Every coffee that scores 84 or higher gets into a one-day online auction. This year, from the auction, Craven-Thompson bid on a Rwandan coffee that was ranked number 18. This coffee will be brought back to Spokane to be roasted at the Cravens Coffee roasting facility before heading out

to retail stores, and perhaps eventually into your coffee pot.

In Rwanda, where fifty percent of the country's foreign earnings come from coffee, The Cup of Excellence could be considered on par with the Oscars for people in the states. "It was huge," says Craven-Thompson. "The Cup of Excellence award ceremony was broadcast live on television there. It was a lot of acknowledgement from Africa as a coffee country."

Africa is rapidly gaining recognition as one of the top coffee producing areas. "Uganda is going to be the next big coffee producing country in Africa," says Craven-Thompson. "There is a certain madness to Africa, a tragicness to it."

While there is tragicness to the land, there is also reason to celebrate with the Cup of Excellence. "It's raising the bar on coffee quality," says Craven-Thompson. "It's verification. What Cup of Excellence does, it's a rising tide that lifts all boats. As Cup of Excellence continues to emerge and develop, it will raise all coffee higher."

"My dying wish is that people understand that the best coffee is not a cheap product," he says. "If we wanted to drink champagne everyday, you and I would be filing bankruptcy, yet we can drink champagne-level coffee." That is something to think about as you luxuriously sip your morning coffee and toast the start of each new day. ■

The Rwandan coffee which was purchased at this year's Cup of Excellence will be available for purchase from Cravens Coffee this January. For more information go to their website www.cravenscoffee.com

