Roaster Run-Down

In our opinion, home coffee roasting remains a Do-It-Yourself adventure. There are dedicated home roasting machines, but these machines are far from perfect. None of them have push-button, “set-it-and-forget-it” ease of use, nor should they. You have to know something about the coffee, and what you are looking for in the roast; you have to be involved in the process. None of them are super reliable and long lasting; you have to spend a lot to get a machine with replaceable parts that will extend the life of the machine, so you may need a replacement in a year or two of heavy use. Roasts on the same model of machine can vary at times and roasts between machines certainly vary too.

What are the prospects of a new super reliable, easy to use home roasting machine coming to market soon? Our answer, “Not good!” Home roasting is a niche, a passion, and despite the enthusiasm of those who have discovered its joys, home roasting is circumscribed to the realm of fanaticism. That’s fine with us, but we wish someone would design a machine that casts aside the aspirations of broader market appeal (i.e. selling a ton of them) and focus on the requirements of the fanatics who currently enjoy roasting. We don’t need another machine that has dumbed-down pre-programmed settings that, in reality, fail to be useful.

There are low-tech, low cost options; that is one of the beautiful things about this hobby. A hot air popper (especially one you have or can find in a thrift store) may be the best DIY method to avoid undue frustration while you are starting out. Skillet or stovetop popper methods can be trickier but rewarding and let you roast greater volume at once. For the adventurous, you can dig out your heat gun, get an aluminum bowl and have at it!

For convenience sake, if you choose to use a machine, we have a brief rundown of our current stock of home roasters:

- **FRESHROAST +8 1/4 lb roaster**
  - An affordable home roaster and beginner machine, a step up from an electric popper; minimal control, a bit too fast, uncertain longevity
- **HEARTHWARE I-ROAST 1/3 lb roaster**
  - A step up from Freshroast, some programmability, better roast times; uncertain longevity
- **NESSO ¼ lb roaster**
  - Reduced smoke output, simple to use; too long a roast
- **BEHMOR ¼ to 1lb roaster**
  - Increased batch size, low smoke output, quiet, very even; low visibility, coasts into cooling, limited control
- **GENE CAFE ½ lb roaster**
  - An even and quiet roaster, easily controlled; coasts into cooling, pretty expensive
- **HOTTOP ½ lb roaster**
  - Even roasting, ideal cooling, lots of control over roast process, very serviceable parts-wise; bigger batch means more smoke, expensive —Derek and Maria

The Green Coffee Bag in Flux

In the past few years, changes have been made in how coffee is handled, changes of which the end user is probably not aware. For a few hundred years, green coffee has been exported in natural fiber bags, jute or sisal. Coffee keeps a reasonably long time in these bags (about a year) and they are very durable. In the past few years, however, the specialty coffee industry has been experimenting with alternatives, primarily vacuum packaging in mylar bags and shipping in cardboard boxes. It is a big investment for mills to install this type of equipment, and to change their handling of green coffee in this way, but the results are clear — vacuum packaging does extend the flavor-life of the coffee.

Vacuum packing at origin is still rare because of the cost. We see it with Cup of Excellence auction coffees, Daterra, Panama Esmeralda, and a few others. It is an expensive process – adding roughly 10 cents a pound. Now .10 a pound might not seem like much to a home roaster; if you use say 50 pounds a year – it is $5. But it adds up when you are buying thousands of pounds. Buyers of top-tier specialty coffee will cope with this increase, but for middle-tier specialty coffee, where cost is more of an issue, I am not sure this technology will be implemented.

The second part of this issue is what happens when the coffee gets here. That’s where the Mighty Mutt comes in, our commercial vacuum sealer. As we have been buying more micro-lots this year, we need to keep these coffees stored in top condition for longer. These
coffees are shipped to us in burlap and we have repacked the coffee, either using the Mighty Mutt, or transferring it to GrainPro SuperGrain bags. The GrainPro bags are a multi-layer plastic bag (a vapor barrier sandwiched between two layers of polyethylene) made to prolong the storage life of dried grains and seeds. They provide a moisture and vapor barrier protecting against “ingress of water vapor, while retaining low O2 and high CO2 levels created by the respiration of the commodity” (quoted from the GrainPro literature). The use of these bags has been suggested for some time, and just this summer the results of an interesting study conducted by Andrew Miller and Luke Harris were published in Roast Magazine (July/August 2008 issue). Their study on four different coffees found that coffee flavor was more well-preserved by warehouse storage in GrainPro than in jute.

With some of the Panama Gesha coffees, we have taken the extra step and vacuum-sealed ½ pound bags, not only for flavor retention but also to eliminate any risk of loss due to a bag breaking in shipping. In a way we are attached to the burlap bags—since so many are decorated in a lovely way and they are so authentic, in a way that a mylar or plastic bag and a cardboard box can not be.

All of this handling is not some thing you will see, except in better tasting cup quality. All green coffee beans should be kept cool and dry at room temperature and away from direct sunlight. The refrigerator is too moist for green beans and the freezer is too dry. In the trade, the general rule in terms of climate for green coffee storage is this: if it’s comfortable for you, then your coffee is happy too. You can store it in the ziplock bag for about a month, but longer than that use just a fabric or paper bag since it allows better air movement. It is not necessary, but if you have a home vacuum sealer you may consider vacuum-packaging any lots you want to store a long time. It will protect the flavors of the bean, especially in humid environments. As we have stated elsewhere many times, it seems wrong to create a “coffee cellar” like wine, since it is a perishable crop. Our attitude is to treat coffee like produce, to enjoy it while it is fresh and in season. And yet it is actually an agriculture product somewhere between “fresh” and “forever” … and new packaging methods are uncovering ways to maximize cup quality for sustained enjoyment. That sounds like a win-win proposition to me … -Maria.

Sweet Maria’s Green Coffee Offering List
as of October 23, 2008 – there are many, many incoming lots weekly. Check the web site – this list is certainly out-of-date!

Central American
El Salvador - Dry-Process
El Salvador - Yellow Bourbon
El Salvador Organic Finca Mauritania
El Salvador Santa Rita Full Natural
Guatemala Antigua Los Pastores Peaberry
Guatemala El Injerto Estate 100% Bourbon
Guatemala Organic Ceylan Maragogype
Guatemala Oriente Dry-Process
Guatemala Finca San Jose Ocana
Guatemala Huehuetenango "Quezal Azul"
Honduras Organic Marcala -Cocosam Coop
Mexico Organic Nayarit Dry-Process
Mexico Organic Chiapas Prich Hoop
Nicaragua Limoncillo Java Longberry Cultivar
Nicaragua Pacamara Peaberry
Panama Auction Lot 2 Esmeralda Gesha
Panama Auction Lot 3 Esmeralda Gesha (Pb)
Panama Auction Lot 5 Esmeralda Gesha
Panama Boquete Lerida Estate "Miel"
Panama Carmen Estate 1800+ Meters
Panama Volcanicco Don Pepe Bourbon
South American
Brazil Daterra Farms Yellow Bourbon
Brazil Jaco Bird Coffee
Brazil Pocos de Caldas -Fazenda Barreiro
Brazil FTO Poco Fundo Peaberry
Colombia Huila Concurso San Pedro (2.5 Star)
Colombia Organcica Cauca Tierradentro (2-Star)
Colombia "Perritos Bravos de Huila" (3-Star)

Coffee offerings are subject to availability. The coffee must be picked and handled in such a way that it is at its best when received. If you are having a hard time making a decision, contact us and we will assist you. You can order ¼ lb lots of coffee for the price of 1 lb. We usually ship on a weekly basis. We usually ship on a weekly basis. Check the web site as of October 23, 2008 – there are many, many incoming lots weekly. Check the web site – this list is certainly out-of-date!

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African- Arabian
Ethiopia Kembata Grade 4 Dry-Process
Ethiopia Dry-Process Limu
Ethiopia Organic DP -Dale Virgin Alem
Kenya AA Auction Lot #393 - Gomberoya
Kenya AA Auction Lot #407 - Gikanjana
Kenya AA Auction Lot #562 - Tegu
Kenya Thika Chania - French Mission Cultivar
Panama Bocuco Lerida Estate "Miel"
Panama Auction Lot 5 Esmeralda Gesha (PB)
Panama Auction Lot 3 Esmeralda Gesha
Panama Auction Lot 2 Esmeralda Gesha

South American
Brazil Daterra Farms Yellow Bourbon
Brazil Jaco Bird Coffee
Brazil Pocos de Caldas -Fazenda Barreiro
Brazil FTO Poco Fundo Peaberry
Colombia Huila Concurso San Pedro (2.5 Star)
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