

Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Artisan Coffee Imports is a small but fast-growing coffee trader that is unlike many others in the US in as much as it focuses on sourcing and supplying coffee for the decaffeinated market

Historically, the decaffeinated coffee market has been ill-served by traders, most of whom tend to focus on high volume non-decaf coffees. Even traders who focus on the specialty market have tended to neglect the decaf sector, but as Ruth Ann Church, who founded Artisan Coffee Importers a couple of years ago explains, with a little extra focus on decaf – and on offering high quality decaf to customers – roasters can target consumers in a market which demographics changes mean will grow and grow.

Ms Church is a decaf drinker herself and a passionate advocate of good quality decaf. After university she planned to work in international development but an introduction to the coffee business and to the lives of coffee farmers saw her decide to change career and start her own business. She says she is passionate about creating connections between coffee farmers and roasters.

Making connections

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Decaf trader builds relationships with growers and roasters



'win-win' relationship between growers and roasters of specialty coffees," Ms Church explained.

Ms Church said she believed that decaf had been "abused and ignored" but said she could see signs among what she called the "upper echelons" of coffee roasters that it is beginning to be taken more seriously. "A growing number of roasters are looking to supply a growing number of decaffeinated coffee drinkers with specialty grade decaffeinated coffee," she said.

Together with Jose Ramirez, Director of Coffee at Farmer Brothers, Ms Church hosted a workshop at the SCAA exhibition and conference in Houston earlier this year, examining the decaf coffee business in detail. The workshop, entitled

'Deconstructing Decaf' enabled Ms Church to share some insights on marketing decaf, focusing on the relationship between costs, pricing and quality.

"By clarifying the fact that there are two extra, costly steps to getting a decaf coffee, people are better able to see why quality compromises are being made all the time,"

Ms Church said in a blog she wrote after the workshop. "We looked at the locations of decaf plants on a world map, comparisons of how much each decaf process costs, compared mark-up practices for pricing decaf and shared consumer data and marketing tips."

Decaf neglected at SCAA

"It was great to have participants in the room from decaffeination plants. Descamex and Maximus were both represented," she explained, noting that a question from the floor really highlighted one of the problems that decaf faces. The question, from someone who had visited the SCAA exhibition earlier, was "why is it at a coffee show like this, you go up to an espresso bar like Counter Culture and they have five amazing coffees, but no decaf? Isn't everyone a little over-wired and caffeine-weary by 3pm on day three of the show," said the attendee.

"Hopefully, any roasters who were in the room are now able to choose to put quality and taste first," said Ms Church. "This typically means asking one's supplier/importer as many questions about the origin, age and storage of the green coffee intended for use as decaf as one asks about any regular coffee, and worrying less about which decaffeination process he should use. Whether a decaf is produced using water or methylene chloride will make less difference to the taste than whether the green coffee was full of defects or a good, fresh, clean coffee."

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Decaf can taste great too

"The point I was trying to get across in the workshop is that there is no reason why decaf should taste any worse than any other category if roasters use high quality coffee beans that have been handled correctly, and if they can be helped to find specialty grade coffee to roast," Ms Church told C&CI, noting that she regularly makes trips to origin to source coffee for the decaf market. In pursuit of high quality, specialty grade coffee she has visited various Central American countries, Colombia, and East Africa, and now offers roasters coffees from these areas.

Part of the problem for the decaf market in the US is that, apart from the decaf plants operated by the multinationals such as Kraft and Procter & Gamble, there are only two independent decaffeination plants in the US. Inevitably, this means that sometimes coffee has to be sent outside the US to be decaffeinated, adding to costs. "Where we send the coffee we import to be decaffeinated tends to vary on a case-by-case basis," she explained. "It might go to a plant in Texas, for instance, or we might send it to be decaffeinated in Colombia."

Asked what she believed are the greatest challenges facing the decaf market and greater consumption of decaf, Ms Church said she believed one of things that would benefit the market is greater attention and enthusiasm from specialty coffee roasters, cafe-owners and baristas.

Decaffeinating smaller batches

Another important point she highlights is the lack of availability of small batch decaffeination options. "The minimum batch is 40-80 bags. Surely the technology to do 10 and 20 bag batches can't be that hard to build," she told C&CI.

"I've only found one decaffeinating company, Qusac in Montreal in Canada, that is able to run a sample batch. They can do a 5lb sample. With all the others, you have to make assumptions based on your experience about how the coffee will taste at the other end of the decaf process. In my mind, this says a lot about how many people who use decaffeinator really care about the taste."

"There is also a lack of publicity about 'wellness' concerns that come along with caffeine. I use the term 'wellness' instead of 'health concern' intentionally," she explained. "I don't think caffeine causes any health problems, but there is ample evidence that long-term use of caffeinated coffee limits the effect of the caffeine. So people tend to increase their use to get the buzz, and over-use of caffeine can lead to anxiousness and irritability. Stopping use of caffeine then leads to headaches."

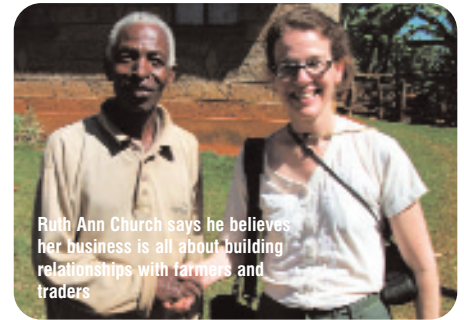
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"It's not life-threatening stuff," Mr Church told C&CI, "but it does affect quality of life. More publicity about this aspect of caffeine is one area I expect to grow."

Catering to consumers' changing tastes

"As described in my presentation at SCAA, the big growth in specialty coffee has come in the younger age range, the 20-35 year olds. As these consumers get older and reach the 45-65 age range, they are going to hear people saying 'you need to cut your caffeine.'"

"If the specialty coffee market doesn't tell consumers such as these about great decaf coffee choices, when they get older



Ruth Ann Church says she believes her business is all about building relationships with farmers and traders

they could easily switch to other beverages that have been doing a good job marketing themselves as non-caffeine options."

Broken down by state, she explained, demand for decaf tends to be greatest in places such as Florida and Arizona, where many older people and retirees in the US choose to live because of the climate, but demand is growing on the east and west coast of the country. Asked which roasters in the US she would highlight as having paid attention to decaf, who are marketing it correctly, Ms Church mentioned Metropolis Coffee Roasters in Chicago, Illinois; Madcap, in Grand Rapids, Missouri; Terroir Coffee in Acton, and Invalsa Coffee in West Newberry (both in Massachusetts); and other roaster such as Verve, Boyd's, Stumptown, Klatch, Doma, Equator Coffee and Ritual, along with Canadian roasters such as Santropol in Montreal and Just Us! in Nova Scotia.

Ms Church said that other roasters offering specialty grade roast coffees, including high quality decafs, include: Portland Roasting in Portland, Oregon; Zingerman's Coffee Company in Ann Arbor; The Roasterie in Kansas City, Missouri; PT's Coffee in Topeka, Kansas; Coffee Labs in Terrytown, New York; Ritual Coffee in San Francisco; Thanksgiving Coffee in Fort Bragg, California; Intelligentsia in Chicago; and Barefoot Coffee in Santa Clara, California.

Overseas expansion

Looking to the long term, Ms Church said she hopes to expand her business beyond the US, and sees great potential in markets such as Japan – where small roasters are prepared to pay high prices for small amounts of high quality coffee. She also sees potential in Europe.

"What I would say to roasters who haven't already picked up on the need to offer customers a great tasting cup of decaf is 'don't discriminate against decaf drinkers', and that taste and quality will build profits," Ms Church concluded. ■ C&CI