

NINE G BARS

Baristas Raise the Bar at the 2005 USBC

by Ellie Hudson-Matuszak, *Intelligentsia Coffee Roasters & Tea Blenders*

As you might have heard by now, the 2005 U.S. Barista Championship (USBC) was a wildly successful educational and professional event, culminating with the crowning of a deserving champion in my friend and colleague Phoung Tran, owner of Lava Java in Ridgefield, Wash. With her victory—and prior to it—Tran exemplifies professionalism, dedication to the craft and creativity.

After attending and participating in a few barista competitions around the country, I arrived at the USBC finally feeling like I knew what to expect from the competitions. One expects to see honored, humble, knowledgeable competitors serving judges their full-bodied espressos; sweet, velvety cappuccinos; and signature drinks with ingredients like chocolate, citrus, cream, caramel, brown sugar and vanilla.

SIGNATURE STYLE AND SKILL

As always, there were some surprises at this year's event. One curve ball came during Round One. About two-thirds of the first-round competitors had delivered their stellar performances and many were sticking around for the announcement of the semi-finalists. I couldn't have been the only person in the room with my jaw on the floor when John Lewis of Café DOMA in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, started his performance with the phrase, "They said I could bring my own grinder . . ." This grinder was none other than a hand grinder he had set up near the judges's table, with which he began to grind barley into a small silver dish as he described his forthcoming signature drink. I should mention that John also set up a water fountain on the judges's table. The fountain was

made of flat burrs and drew water from a source he set up on the stage during his prep time. This, to me, was true performance art, on par with Heather Perry's (of Coffee Klatch in San Dimas, Calif. and the 2003 USBC Champion) simultaneous four-martini-glass pour of 2004. In other words, I was absolutely and completely in awe. These kinds of feats of performance make the room a little warmer and get the adrenaline flowing faster.

Another surprise occurred during the semifinals, although the competitors didn't find out about it until the evening after the competition was over. Allow me to explain the gravity of this achievement by giving and intentionally simplistic interpretation of how the competition's scoring works. There are seven total judges in the competition, six of whom assign scores and one head judge who keeps the others calibrated and double checks the technical details. A performance is evaluated for taste, technical soundness and presentation. There are some point categories in which a competitor is scored on a "yes-no" basis, where only a score of one point or zero points is possible. In other point categories a qualitative judgment is required to assign a value from zero to six points. Obviously, every competitor is striving for perfection, but we are all aware that achieving six points in even one category is virtually never done. A five-and-a-half-point or a five-point score are not much easier to achieve and are pretty rare. So, in general, the top scores in a given competition float around the 625- to 725-point range. I consider the basic benchmarks to be the following: A good score is about 550 points, a very good score would fall within the 650-700 range, and a 700-plus score is that intangible pinnacle of excellence over which we competitors are constantly agonizing and striving to achieve.

The collective eyes of the barista community widened with surprise and amazement when we learned of Ryan Dennhardt's (of Barista's Daily Grind in Kearney, Neb.) score in the semifinals: 820.50. I hardly need to mention that among the members of the 800 club, to my knowledge, Dennhardt is currently flying solo. The resulting effect of this score is two-fold. The first, and most evident, is that a deserving competitor receives his due accolades and respect. I can only assume that those espressos must have been absolutely outstanding! The second effect falls on the rest of us in the barista community; now that someone has done it, we are stuck with the realization that it can be done. While baristas constitute a

largely friendly and somewhat folksy group, we are also fiercely competitive, and I have no doubt in my mind that the 800-plus score is already on a lot of our minds in terms of the 2005-2006 season.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

For me, though, probably the most significant surprise of the 2005 USBC was largely cultural. After arriving for the competitors' meeting and exchanging greetings with colleagues old and new, my emotional state was one of genuine excitement with equal parts nervousness, ferocious determination and pure enthusiasm thrown in. Over the past months of training with my Intelligentsia teammates, Amber Sather, Matt Riddle, Stephen "The Rog" Rogers and Amanda Ladas, many times I felt so proud of each of them and humbled to be on a team with them. Looking around the room that Wednesday in Seattle, I could not help but feel similar pride and humility to be in the company of other outstanding professionals and to be a part of a community with such talented baristas. It's that that feeling, almost overwhelming in its power, that keeps baristas closely knit.

But despite the camaraderie, we all knew the reality of the reason we were there, and that was to compete against each other for something we each craved. As a competitor, one tries to focus only on delivering his or her best performance, but in the company of famous and proven competitors, it can be a bit of a challenge. As a regional winner, I attempted to use the first few days to relax and enjoy the company of my colleagues before I had to actually perform, but even then, the underlying tension was apparent.

Wednesday night, the night before the competition was to begin, my Intelligentsia teammates and I discussed

the pros and cons of the stresses of competing. On one hand, nervous energy is a sign that one is participating in something important. On the other hand, we thought, "If it's this stressful on Wednesday, what are Saturday and Sunday going to be like?" The answer to this question was perhaps the most significant surprise of all, and a sign of

more than six potential top competitors. Not everyone could make the finals, and believe me, there were more than six knowledgeable, professional, entertaining baristas who could represent their cafés and the community well. Perhaps it was in coming to the realization that no matter who the final six were, the barista community would be proud of their achievements and looking for a great competition in the finals. The moment I learned I was one of the lucky six, I felt so proud and honored to have the chance to represent this wonderful barista community.

END RESULTS

On Sunday, as the six finalists began to arrive to compete, it seemed that on this day there was far more respect in the room than tension. There is no doubt in my mind that this carried through into each of our performances. It was a relief to me that there were no disasters in the finals, that each competitor delivered a strong performance and the winners would be determined by their skills and the results in the cup. This, coupled with the fact that so many of the semifinalists and first-round competitors came to cheer on and support the finalists, created an experience that was successful in a way that I could not have imagined.

Contrary to what I had observed and feared on Wednesday, Sunday turned out to be the day with the least amount of tension and stress and the most fun and

camaraderie. This is a bellwether of exciting things to come for the barista community. If the 2005 USBC is any indication, next year will be filled with new thrills as the envelope is pushed in terms of achievement in ingenuity, scoring, and professionalism. ☕



Photo by Sheldon Ferguson

Hudson-Matuszak took second place at this year's USBC.

great things for the future of the barista community.

After performing on Saturday during the semifinals (I was seventh to compete), I began to see a very real transformation taking place. As the competition progressed and we all witnessed one strong performance after another, the tension began to give way to an environment more of respect and solidarity. Everyone had been doing the math: six spots in the finals, and many

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