

Traditional roots, fresh direction

D.E Master Blenders 1753's Wayne Archer and Tas Chronis tell *BeanScene* about blending the advantages of an international network with a localised approach.

While 'multi-national' may have emerged as almost a dirty word in a market of independent coffee shops, D.E Master Blenders 1753's Wayne Archer and Tas Chronis aren't shy about highlighting their international ties.

Following a spin-off last year from parent company Sara Lee, D.E Master Blenders is now one of the world's largest tea and coffee companies. With over two and a half centuries in the industry, and a global network of green bean buyers, Wayne and Tas say that D.E Master Blenders' international connections have allowed the company to improve the Australian coffee industry as a whole. With a buying power unmatched by but a few companies in the world, the business can work beyond the individual farmer, helping improve livelihoods in producing countries while lifting the overall quality of coffee.

At the local level, D.E Master Blenders played a key role in pioneering barista championships in Australia. Prior to the introduction of the Australasian Specialty Coffee Association (AASCA), from 1998 to 2000 D.E Master Blenders held national competitions under its Piazza D'Oro brand, and would send those baristas to compete at the international level.

Tas says it's been rewarding to see those competitions move on to a wider industry level through AASCA. "These competitions are fantastic because they're not about a brand, but about the Australian industry as a whole," he says.

D.E Master Blenders can also be credited as being a spring board for some of Australia's top coffee names, including current AASCA President Craig Dickson, two-time Australia Barista Champion Dave Makin, and Lion Nathan's National Account Manager for Commercial Coffee

"WE ARE WILLING TO BACK GREAT IDEAS AND PEOPLE, TO ALLOW THESE AND THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE TO FLOURISH."

Lance Brown, who all worked for D.E Master Blenders at an early point in their career.

"There are a lot of guys in the industry who in the last 15 years have come out of D.E Master Blenders," says Tas.

Tas points to this history as a fascinating development, that the local coffee industry has benefitted so much from an international brand, in what to him seems like an inherent contradiction.

"We're a big company but really we're a local company," he says. "We are willing to back great ideas and people, to allow these and the industry as a whole to flourish."

Aside from great talent, the physical manifestation of D.E Master Blenders' role in Australia is mainly found in its local coffee offering. Master Roaster Wayne says there is an impressive synergy in using international resources to develop a local product, in terms of the quality management of the coffee he produces on a daily basis.

With approx 300 million cups of D.E Master Blenders coffee sold each year in Australia, Wayne says the company is better placed than most in ensuring consistent quality.

"To maintain a high quality over a period of time, that's a challenge," says Wayne. "We're tasting coffee from morning until night, cupping it as it comes in, checking everything that goes into the finished product."

Over the years, Wayne says increased consumer knowledge about coffee has added a new dimension to the process. Not only does the company have to regularly deliver quality roasted coffee, but the brand is responsible for how that coffee is ultimately presented in the cup.

"The challenges are ever-present, in maintaining the consistency of a product served nationally. And the more consumers



D.E Master Blenders released the new Org blend this year.



Photography Jeff Mackay

are educated, we have to show that we can deliver that consistent product through training,” Wayne says. “There are a lot of things that people say that aren’t correct. We need to educate on a consistent platform.”

In the recent trend of origin travels, Tas says he’s noticed how strongly these trips, of roasters visiting farmers, have become a focal point in the Australian industry. While he highlights the advantages of better knowledge about the production of coffee, Tas says too much attention paid to these trips could narrow the focus of improving the larger production and quality chain.

“In Australia and New Zealand, we’re seeing this focus on travel adventures, rather than the quality of the coffee that’s being brought in,” says Tas. “It’s easy to go to a country, take some pictures and write a story about it. But when you’re dealing with single origin coffees, you’re narrowing your focus to one type of coffee for a set period of time. The true challenge is maintaining quality over time.”

Tas says this “origin adventure” focus can also be limiting in terms of improving the livelihoods of farmers, a process that goes hand-in-hand with improving quality. Although a roaster may help a single farmer by visiting his or her farm, there are



D.E Master Blenders Wayne Archer

nearly 100 million people around the world working in coffee, and this approach helps but a fraction.

With large purchasing power, for the last 10 years D.E Master Blenders has focused instead on certification initiatives that look to improve quality and farmer livelihoods on a wider basis. The company has committed to purchasing 30 per cent of its coffee from certification programs such as Rainforest Alliance, UTZ Certified and Fairtrade. “In working with big organisations we are trying to help the

entire industry,” says Tas.

Ten years ago, the company also established the D.E Foundation, which provides education to specific origin countries like Uganda and Vietnam.

“In working on the ground in regions, we can offer expertise in growing good quality product, that then helps producers to acquire the price premium gained from certification,” says Tas.

In dealing with these farmers’ final product on a daily basis, Wayne says he knows all too well the importance of strong

farmer education.

“Growers need to understand the type of quality that roasters want,” he says. “These farmers are mostly living on a subsistence basis. They need help to increase their yields and reach a certain level before we help them better understand quality.”

As a large company, Tas says D.E Master Blenders is better placed than most in helping farmers reach this level – even if they aren’t posting pictures from all their trips overseas.

“You look at an organisation such as UTZ Certified, with major companies like D.E Master Blenders committing to long term purchases of certified coffee, and that’s a significant increase of support for a large group of farmers”, says Tas.

The recent spin-off at the international level is largely intended to help D.E Master Blenders re-focus on its coffee and tea business efforts. This direction is in no way new, but rather a move back to the company’s beginnings, which started as a coffee and tobacco shop in the village of Joure, The Netherlands in 1753. The shop sold its own Douwe Egberts branded coffee, and expanded into the general retail market. The company was one of the first to advertise in print in Holland in

the 1920s, and later one of the first to air television commercials in 1967.

Douwe Egberts was purchased by US-based food giants Sara Lee in the mid-1970s, however with a moratorium that for 25 years it would continue to be run as an independent company. When that agreement expired in the early-2000s, Tas explains it made commercial sense to amalgamate much of the business’s operations with its parent company.

Tas calls this period the “dark ages”, when some of the fine distinctions that helped Douwe Egberts thrive over two and a half centuries was lost in the transition.

“I think [management] realised then that it didn’t make sense. Customers were confused and didn’t know where we stood,” says Tas. “And that’s the key to the industry. In coffee, that passion has to be centred on our consumers and customers.”

The spin-off was completed by the end of 2012, with the coffee and tea business now officially named D.E Master Blenders 1753.

In Australia, that focus will continue to manifest itself in D.E Master Blenders key brands. This includes Piazza D’Oro and Espresso di Manfredi, two Italian-inspired coffees carefully blended to ensure consistent quality over time.

To give itself some flexibility in highlighting origin coffee, the company has developed the Two Seasons brand, a coffee that changes twice a year depending on what exciting coffees are available. For the Two Seasons blend, Wayne takes advantage of D.E Master Blenders’ wide network of green bean buyers based at origin. Using this intelligence he can research weather patterns and conditions to select the best single-origins available, with the flexibility to change his purchasing depending on quality.

A new offering the company just launched at the beginning of 2013 is a new Org blend, a Certified Organic coffee. The process is audited from farming practices right up to how the coffee is shipped and roasted, for cafés and consumers looking for a truly organic offering.

The new Org blend is another move in D.E Master Blenders’ commitment to certification initiatives. While quality supply limits their ability to purchase all of their coffee from certification initiatives, it’s something Tas says the company might achieve one day.

“It may not be in our generation, but if we can keep helping growers, it might be possible in the next,” says Tas. “After all, we’ve been around for 260 years, we’re not going away too soon.”



**LATORRE DUTCH
COFFEE TRADERS**

Suppliers of high-end
specialty green beans

w501/599 Pacific Hwy,
St Leonards NSW 2065
(M) 0430 817 064

info@latorredutchcoffee.com
www.latorredutchcoffee.com



WEGA ATLAS EVD “THE STYLISH PERFORMER”
WWW.WEGAAUSTRALIA.COM.AU | SALES@CWE.COM.AU