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From Source to Sip: How Southside Espresso's Sean Marshall Turned an Obsession into a Career

posted by [AMBER AMBROSE](#) | July 31, 2014



Sean Marshall doing a coffee cupping – a very specific way to brew and taste various coffees.

Coffee is no longer just a way to wake up in the morning, it's become an art form. Of the caffeinated masterpieces, Sean Marshall is an artisan in the true sense of the word, relentlessly seeking the perfect profile among some of the world's best coffee beans through his roasting company, **Fusion Beans**. Marshall serves the final product in various forms at his Montrose coffee shop, **Southside Espresso**, and it's an arduous labor of love each bean goes through to get to every cup.

"There's a lot of trial and error," says Marshall of the roasting process. "I'll do a lot of test batches and then do a cupping [tasting]. Usually I come up here on Tuesdays and work with one of my baristas that I'm training as an apprentice, on the patio with a small test roaster. I'm better now than I use to be at nailing a profile, but some do take a while. It took me a whole 150-pound bag to get it right recently."

Though the opportunity cost is sometimes high, Marshall feels he owes it to the farmers that grow the coffee to serve the best possible version of each. To source the beans he roasts, Marshall pays frequent visits to farms around the world to foster relationships with farmers themselves, get to know their land, way of life and appreciate their side of the business. He describes his first visit to a coffee farm as a "spiritual" experience.

"I didn't know how much it would impact my life," says Marshall of that fateful trip to Costa Rica. "When you

learn all these technical skills, watch barista champions make drinks on YouTube, make coffee all the time, talk about coffee all the time and then shake a man's hand so calloused it barely bends anymore, because he picked my coffee — and has his whole life — it becomes very real, very quick.”

From that moment on, Marshall's coffee obsession became a quest along with something else: a debt of gratitude to the farmers to whom he felt he owed everything in his whole career, a career that began when he was only 15, though he wasn't aware of it at the time.

“I was helping wash dishes and tinkering around with the espresso machine at a small shop in Clear Lake,” says Marshall of his first job in the industry. “I did my time, as many of us do, at the ‘Green Giant’ [Starbucks] for nearly five years and during that time was doing all kinds of other things too: going to nursing school, working a job as a nurse tech, a job as a telemetry tech. It was a very different world, a world I could have very easily ended up in.”

If it hadn't been for a bridal expo — yes, a bridal expo — coffee may have always been just a side job for Marshall. In search of a wedding photographer, Marshall and his now-wife visited the Bridal Extravaganza when he spotted a booth with an espresso machine. Interest piqued, the interaction that followed would become a definitive step to Marshall founding both Fusion Beans and Southside Espresso.

Marshall told the man behind the machine confidently that he was “the best barista in the city,” and asked for a job. It landed him an interview, and in that interview, Marshall met an unexpected mentor that would push him to follow his passion, and turn it into a career. His name was Ken Palmer, and he'd been working in the coffee industry for the last 30 years.



Sean Marshall (left) and his mentor Ken Palmer (right) on a coffee farm in Costa Rica.

“I'd paired off with Ken and would go with him to consulting gigs and do tastings with him,” says Marshall. “He inadvertently became my mentor. It was a new track for me. I'd had dreams of grandeur, of opening up a coffee shop, but now it was real. For the first time too, I didn't want to just open a coffee shop, I wanted to roast coffee, because it was something tangible.”

From his exploits with Palmer, Marshall then ended up as a barista at one of the city's first and most respected craft coffee houses, **Catalina Coffee**. He gained even more experience and dove further into the technicalities of coffee extraction, latte art, and what he thinks was “getting nerdier and nerdier” each day. Eventually, Marshall decided the timing was right to start roasting his own beans and bought a very small roaster from Brazil and began to experiment in his garage, moving shortly thereafter to a warehouse where he was roasting alongside his employer, Max Gonzalez of Catalina Coffee and **Amaya Roasting Company**.

Marshall quickly grew into a viable roaster and opened up Montrose's Southside Espresso, where he still enjoys pulling a perfect espresso and describing its origins, flavor profiles and history to the customers he's serving. Even when he's not working the bar itself, Marshall can be found doing test batch roasts outside on the small patio on Tuesday afternoons, training one his Southside employees as an apprentice. From sourcing to serving, he's as hands-on as possible, enjoying every step of the process.

“When you receive a bag of green coffee, there so much unknown to it,” says Marshall. “There's a story behind it. Coffee became a cool puzzle for me, one that is so endless it could drive a person mad. I'm going to enjoy it until the very end. Someone needs to tell these stories.”

And plenty of people are willing to listen to them over a good cup of perfectly roasted coffee.

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Joseph Walker [July 31, 2014](#)

Passion, purpose, and perseverance. For Sean to have the passion for his craft the way he does is very inspiring.

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