

# INSIDE THE ROASTER

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH ALBUQUERQUE

General Manager of Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting

**What is your earliest memory of Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting?**

Well, I basically grew up running around SCCRC. I've always said that the smell of coffee gives me a warm fuzzy feeling because it triggers memories of my childhood. At our café near the top of the mall (Pacific Ave.) we used to roast our coffee inside the café-I remember the mesmerizing action of the stir-flex sweeping through the beans when they first came out of the roaster, the toasty, comforting aroma that permeated a five block radius around our shop, and the people, employees and customers, some of whom still play a vital role in our business today that have been like an extended family as the years pass by.

**What position did you work first for SCCR and how old were you? What was your favorite part about that position?**

My first paid position was as a cashier (truffle counter specifically) at our café in Aptos. I was 8 (child labor laws don't apply when you're family), so I had to stand on a milk crate to reach the register, but the money was good (\$4.25/hr.) and the job involved strict quality control parameters (candy had to be sampled on a regular basis to make sure it was good!), which made me feel like an integral part of the team!

I graduated to Barista when I was 13, working most of my high school years at our Aptos Café, then transferring to our Santa Cruz location where I worked as Day Supervisor, Night Supervisor, Assistant Manager and eventually Store Manager throughout my college years. After graduating from Stanford University with a degree in Literature (what better preparation for a career in coffee?), I came to work at our Administrative Office in Watsonville as Client Services Assistant, then Client Services Manager, Accounts Payables and most recently General Manager.

**What is your position currently in SCCR and for how long?**

I have been General Manager of SCCRC for 3+ years. I have been on company payroll for 20...

**Where did you go for your first visit to origin and how did you feel about it?**

My first trip to a coffee origin was a 10 day visit to Costa Rica when I was in high school (c. 1995). It was incredible to see how coffee was processed and what a coffee tree or coffee cherry for that matter looked like up close and personal.

I had never been outside the US, so that was an eye-opening experience on multiple levels, but on that particular trip we stayed at a nice hotel/resort and the coffee farms we visited were larger estates. Several years later, in 2001, my family and I traveled to Nicaragua during a very difficult time for coffee farmers (now known as the "coffee crisis"). On that trip, we visited areas where there was extreme poverty, small farmers struggling to afford one meal a day, coffee pickers from larger plantations who had lost their jobs and were camped out on the side of the road. At the same time, we were learning about the positive impact Fair Trade had made for some of the cooperatives that were faring better during the crisis. That experience helped shape the person and the business woman that I am today. It made

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me infinitely more conscious of the impact our decisions as individual consumers or businesses have on the lives of other human beings, their families, their communities, and ultimately the opportunity that exists to enrich our own lives by embracing those connections. Since then, I have been lucky enough to have equally life changing experiences in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Colombia, and Guatemala ...to name a few. (continued)

## Where have you traveled most recently and why?

I have just recently returned from Costa Rica for the second time this year and a visit to Nicaragua to follow up on our exciting new AgroEco Coffee Initiative in partnership with the Community Agroecology Network here in Santa Cruz. We have successfully launched our first AgroEco coffee this year from CoopePueblos Coffee Cooperative in Agua Buena, Costa Rica. We hope to launch a second coffee through a partner cooperative in Nicaragua this coming Spring. During the Costa Rica leg of the trip, I had the exciting opportunity to teach a cupping class for the Administrative Board and other farmer members of CoopePueblos as well as the Founders of Community Agroecology Network. It was quite a challenge teaching a cupping class in Spanish, but it ended up being an incredibly entertaining learning opportunity for everyone, myself included. I realized during the class that I didn't know how to say "spit" in Spanish—now I do. (Escupir, for those who care to know). I certainly spotted a few natural cuppers in the class, and the cupping itself generated some fascinating discussions. I also spent about a half-day picking coffee cherries on Roberto Jimenez' farm in Agua Buena. His wife Noemy and I passed the time chatting about traditional songs and jokes the coffee farmers would use to make the hours pass quicker.

While in Nicaragua, I visited the UCA San Ramon where my friend, Dr. Chris Bacon, among many other things, has been working with a community of farmers to conduct tree and orchid inventories on coffee farms. There is a group of young people in the community, primarily sons and daughters of coffee farmers, and many of whom are pursuing University degrees in subjects like Agroecology, that both conduct the tree inventories and also act as guides to AgroEco tourists interested in visiting the community and learning about the way of life and the incredible biodiversity present on the coffee farms. This is the community with which we hope to partner on an AgroEco Nicaraguan coffee.

In Nicaragua I was also able to pass on a scholarship through the Colleen Crosby Memorial Fund and the International Women in Coffee Alliance. As with so many things in life, this truly reinforced the notion that events unfold

exactly as they should when the timing is right! I had arranged a meeting with Merling Preza, Executive Director of Prodecoop (the cooperative from which we buy our Nicaraguan Segovias coffee). She and Chris informed me that they actually had an idea in mind for the scholarship money and explained to me that one of the key founders of Prodecoop had just passed away in the last few months and that even more tragically his wife passed away shortly thereafter. Their youngest child is a 13 year old girl named Tania and they wondered if I felt comfortable passing the money on to her to help support her education. Furthermore, Tania and her older brother had traveled to Esteli to meet me in person and would be joining us the next day on our field visit. Knowing that we had experienced a similar loss, they thought it might be a meaningful connection to make for both of us. Which it was! Making small chat, I asked Tania what her favorite subject was in school and she said "business administration," and that one day she wants to work for the Coop. Of course she was a little bit shy, but she seemed to me a very bright, motivated young woman. After spending a couple days together, I really couldn't quite tell how she felt about the whole experience, but just as we were leaving her brother said, "Now, Tania, this is your last chance" and she looked up at me and said "Could I take

a picture with you?" It was really sweet—a small gesture that meant a lot. I think Colleen would be smiling with that big sparkly grin of hers to see the opportunity and the connections that scholarship created.

## What is your favorite element of Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting?

My favorite thing about Santa Cruz Coffee is the people. My second favorite thing about Santa Cruz Coffee is the coffee. Now don't get me wrong, when the first blueberry laden fragrant notes wafted their way to my nose the day we cupped our Ethiopian Amaro Gayo, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. It continues to amaze me the subtlety, complexity, and staggering range of flavor potential locked in these little brown beans. There's nothing quite like it—wine comes close. But why do I love working in coffee? Because of the relationships, experiences, challenges and opportunities it has brought to my life.

