Cafe Habitat: Home of the Free Bean

Madeleine Charney, Granby

The thrum of the roasting machine and an aromatic whiff of fresh coffee beans told me I was in the right place. Cafe Habitat (CH), a worker-owned, wholesale cooperative, is located in a sunny, high-ceiling warehouse in Florence, Mass. Daphne Bishop, one of the coop’s founders, greeted me at the door. Ronald St. Pierre, cofounder, gave a wave from beside the roaster, joining us intermittently between loading the machine, checking the temperature and monitoring the beans’ color change from yellow to cinnamon to a rich brown. All their coffee is certified organic and almost all is derived from fair trade sources. But Cafe Habitat does not simply sell good (and fair) coffee. There’s a philosophy brewed into every cup as well.

It All Began...

The company’s story began with a commitment to promoting economic justice for homeless people. Between 1994 and 1995, a group from the Grove Street Inn, a shelter in Northampton, met regularly to discuss alternatives that would break the cycle of poverty. Bishop, a staff member at the time, and St. Pierre, a shelter resident, both had backgrounds in sales and marketing and were key voices in this process. In 1995, as a result of these meetings, the Center for Better Living (CBL) was born. The organization packaged already-roasted coffee, adding imaginative labels designed by St. Pierre. These packages were then sold at fundraising events for homeless shelters. The main goal of these collaborations was “to help people take control of their economic destiny,” explains Bishop. When the popularity of this arrangement became apparent, Bishop and St. Pierre put their heads together again and in 1996 Cafe Habitat was born.

Although the company is now a for-profit enterprise, fundraising continues to be the cornerstone for CH. Bishop has watched communities being “decimated by the so-called ‘global economy.’” To combat that trend, CH aims to expand their collaborations with other non-profits, networking to give money back to the communities. For instance, they designed a custom blend for a fundraiser at the Western Massachusetts chapter of American Friend’s World Service. The label reading ”Grounds for Peace.” They have aligned often with Church World Service as well as many houses of worship. CH also sells to food coops, restaurants, and natural food stores in the local area and across the U.S. Their best seller is “Wicked Women’s Roast,” described as “a three-bean blend spiked with espresso and attitude.” Other blends’ names also hint at CH’s robust political stance including Extreme Beans, Emma’s Gold, and Radical Roast.

Beans Across America

Their most extensive collaboration so far has been with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. The result was Coalition Cafe, a training program to teach homeless shelter residents how to operate a cafe. To top it off, all the courses were designed and taught by former shelter residents with Bishop’s and St. Pierre’s initial guidance. The pinnacle of the program’s success came in 2002 when the program clinched an exclusive contract as sole coffee vendor for all of Chicago’s city parks. “One of our missions is to put shelters out of business,” said St. Pierre with a knowing glance.

Back Home

CH’s more recent history includes a 5-year HUD grant in partnership with the City of Northampton. This program provided job training for skilled and talented people to become self-employed instead of having to resort to low-wage jobs, for example in fast food restaurants. “Once you’re in a shelter, it’s hard to get out,” explained Bishop. Hundreds of people passed through the program, many of them moving on to start their own businesses in woodworking, pottery, and other trades. “A goal of economic empowerment is a great one for seed money,” added Bishop.

As Above, So Below

Just as CH toasts economic independence at home, they also stick to this philosophy when purchasing their beans. They select sources from small cooperatives in Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Columbia, Peru, Sumatra, and Ethiopia that empower “the people coming down off the mountain” with housing and health care. Two years ago, Bishop and St. Pierre traveled to the mountains of central Panama to assist a coop called CafeEl Tute with their first export. These coffee growers have taken control of their business, operating four stores on their own terms. Many of the founders of such coops were guerilla fighters or sympathiz-
Nonsense Game Peers into NOFA Soul

Without being told exactly why, the board and staff were asked to provide words ("plural noun," "adjective," "verb ending with ‘rrg,’ etc.) which were dropped into blanks in the welcoming address written by Board Member Carolyn Llewellyn. What came out was alternately nonsensical and sort of true—often weirdly a propos:

Welcome, ladies and waitresses, to the annual NOFA Retreat. Each winter the zippers red and dogs of the Northeast Comely Farming Association take some time to get to know each other. agitate delicious rutabaga and sing about what is important for the present and future of our esteemed cow. Thank you for all gathering so silly. It is turgid crows like
to do something good, make money, and not be greedy.” With a grin, he then turned back to check the status of the next batch roasting in the machine.

Café Habitat offers available for purchase at Cornucopia. State Street Market and Good Thyme Deli in Northampton and the People’s Market at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. For more information or to arrange a fundraiser for your organization: 413 584-5408, cafehabitat@earthlink.net. Websites are www.cafehabitat.com or www.transfairusa.org

you that make NOFA such a crunchy organization.

After our delicious, fantabulous meal, we hope you are all feeling well-rested and ready to dance and plan for the year ahead. Tonight we will spend time getting to know each other and our various pinkos within NOFA. Tomorrow we have a special guest. Michael Jackson, our facilitator, will help us conic together to amble where we have been and propitiate what the future may hold.

We are all here together as people concerned about our hair, food and skating. Despite our common octopii, we do not always agree on exactly how NOFA should poop. Please, treat each other and every rotary engine here with the utmost respect. Remember, do unto pigs as you would have done unto you.

As we eat into the cheese, please consider what issues are most important to you. What do you think is the single most important concubine facing NOFA people in these trying times? What can Julie do about it?

Thank you all for coming. We know salaries can get long. but please do your best to pay attention, offer your career(?) and keep an open sticky note. We trust that you will all treat each other happily and with glasses.

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