

A Connoisseur of Coffee

David Roche travels the world to put more quality coffee on the market

By Jeanie Senior

David Roche is crazy about the coffee industry. “If you really get involved in it, it never lets you go,” he says.

David, who has lived in White Salmon since 1999 with his wife, Maria Venero, and their daughter, Nohelani, is the chief technical director for the Coffee Quality Institute, which works to increase the amount of quality coffee available on the market, and to improve the lives of people who produce it.

A large part of David’s job is managing the Coffee Corps volunteer program, which sends coffee industry experts around the world to work with farmers and producers to raise and market quality coffee.

Coffee Corps volunteers offer help from Mexico to Madagascar. An interactive map on the institute’s Web site—www.coffeeinstitute.org—highlights some of the programs.

David—who works on the Colombian Specialty Coffee Program for the organization—estimates he spends 40 percent of his time traveling around the world.

“Three times to Africa, five times to Central America, three times to Colombia,” he says, ticking off a year’s travels.

Because of Coffee Corps, David says he is more likely to encounter industry experts in a foreign country than at home.

During the last two years, about 110 people have worked as mentors and advisers in Latin America,



David Roche at a farm in Colombia.

Africa, Sumatra and Indonesia.

Coffee is a compelling force in the international economy. It is the second most-traded commodity in the world—trailing only oil—with the robusta species traded on the London Commodity Market and the arabica species traded on the New York Commodity Market.

Some Klickitat County residents may connect David to David’s Organic Coffee—the packaged Moka/Sumatra beans sold at the Dickey Farms fruit stand in Bingen, at White Salmon Thriftway and at Rosauer’s in Hood River.

He calls David’s Coffee virtually a nonprofit endeavor and a sideline to his real job. He says the venture is “just to keep my friends happy.”

David’s Coffee is not served at restaurants or coffee shops, and he says he does not promote it.

The beans are roasted in Portland.

“I just find the coffees and make sure it’s roasted right and it’s organically certified,” he says. “If anything good comes out of that coffee, besides making my friends happy, it’s that I’ve learned a lot

about retail.”

David, who grew up in Southern California, has a bachelor’s degree in horticulture from California Polytechnic University and a master’s degree in horticulture with an emphasis in viticulture from the University of California at Davis.

While at Cal Poly, David says he started drinking “really good coffee” at local coffee shops. Sometimes, he and his classmates would drive to Berkeley and stand in line to buy coffee at Peet’s.

“I probably wouldn’t have finished college if it hadn’t been for coffee,” he jokes.

David spent three years in Colombia as a Peace Corps volunteer.

“That didn’t make me a coffee expert, but I learned to grow coffee,” he says.

He also became fluent in Spanish while there.

Despite his study of viticulture, David has never worked full time with wine grapes, but he says the knowledge is applicable.

“I consider coffee to be where grapes were 50 years ago in many ways,” he says.

His first job was in Mexico with Lipton Tea—which also owns Larry’s spices—looking after the company’s tea and spice production.

In the late 1980s, David managed Trout Lake Farms—the huge organic herb and spice-growing operation at the base of Mount Adams. He left to go to Hawaii, where he worked for a large landowner looking for crops to diversify from sugar cane.

Coffee kept coming up as an alternative crop, so David says he flew around the world learning about it.

Eventually, he oversaw the establishment of a 500-acre coffee plantation on Maui.

He enlisted the knowledge of 19 industry experts in assessing the



Above, David, right, discusses the Coffee Corps volunteers with Nate DeVol, owner of the Dog River Coffee Co. in Hood River. Below, the logo of David's Organic Coffee, which is available in some Columbia Gorge stores.

coffee varieties he considered, setting up a “cupping room,” where the coffees could be evaluated.

Cupping is a term of art in the coffee industry—a precise means of gauging the flavor, aroma, acidity, aftertaste and other characteristics.

“At the time I was only trying to figure out what varieties to plant,” David says, noting he became acquainted with people who now are among the industry’s leaders.

He moved back to the Gorge from Hawaii to be vice president of operations for Klickitat Organics, where he was working when he was recruited to his present position.

An offshoot of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA)—the trade association that focuses on the top 20 percent of coffee, called “gourmet” or “premium”—the Coffee Quality Institute received funding both from the U.S. Agency for International Development and from industry donors.

As part of its goal to move more coffee out of the commodity market and into the quality market, the institute also sets up “Q” auctions, which offer buyers guaranteed-quality coffee in commercial-size quantities. That means higher

returns to coffee growers and a boost to their countries’ economies.

David says he particularly likes coffee from Ethiopia—where it is a native plant—as well as from Kenya.

“Any good coffee from any region I like—if it’s good, it’s good,” he quickly notes.

David says he doesn’t care about a preference for roasts, but says light and medium roasts can have more flavor. He says he definitely does not like flavored coffees. He does like espresso.

“But I normally drink drip coffee—made either in a drip coffee maker or just by pouring it through a little filter,” he says. “I make it

pretty strong. I don’t usually put cream in it, but that’s just me.”

David grinds the coffee beans just before he makes the coffee. He says storage of the beans is critical.

“You can put it in the refrigerator or the freezer, but it needs to be in a totally airtight container,” he says.

David says he always carries his own coffee when he travels. He used to carry a French press, but now he uses a small plastic cone and filters.

If his hotel room has a coffee maker, he uses it to boil the water, but “only out of desperation” does he drink the coffee provided.

“The main thing is that people start drinking good coffee,” he says. “And when you’re drinking good coffee, you’re most likely helping out the farmers, and farmers who do a good job should be rewarded.”

Even with a strong brew, a pound of coffee makes about 40 cups, and David says it is still cheaper than soda pop.

“It’s the second-cheapest beverage on earth, after tea,” he says. “And it’s worth investing in good coffee. Remember, it is often the first thing that touches your lips in the morning.” ■

