

A photograph of a white ceramic coffee press and a white mug on a wooden table. The coffee press is in the foreground, and the mug is in the background. The scene is lit with soft, natural light, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

the Power *of* Slow

**Improving Coffee Quality
by Resisting the Cult of Speed**

by Benjamin Myers

*“I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay
out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”*

—John Muir



UNDER THE STARK light of a bright moon in the jungle of Chiapas, Manuel Diaz directs a small army of coffee pickers through clusters of diminutive shrubs. This is Finca Santa Cruz in the La Concordia protected area at high midnight in February 2012. The regional cooperative’s finest coffee pickers have been assembled for the task of special cherry selection. Feeling is key. Trained fingers press against the skin, judging the pulp beneath. Each pick is made by hand to maintain the integrity of the shrubs’ nerve stems, enabling future fruit to stem from the spot where once this cherry stood. The process is methodical and slow.

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The coffee is picked at full moon, at its peak sugar development. Though the science behind biodynamic farming practices such as this is unproven, the judges in Mexico City some months later at the Mexican National Barista Competition will be unanimous in their approval; when Fabrizio Sención Ramírez of Cafe Sublime uses this coffee as his single-origin espresso, they will crown him this year's king of Mexican baristas. The work of Diaz and the farmers, while unorthodox and nonlinear, pays off.

Some eight months later, while zigzagging through the scattered streets of downtown Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in a blue taxi, Diaz tells me how he believes a slower process can improve the quality of coffee.

"The environmental conditions of higher-quality coffee are found in cold climates (19–21 centigrade), where coffee plants work slowly and efficiently. Beans develop slowly and ripen slowly, leading to higher levels of acidity and density," he said, noting that low pH and temperature allow for greater quality changes during the fermentation process. "With the drying of coffee, the slow drying at a low temperature allows for even drying and avoids damage to not only sensory attributes like aroma, sweetness and acidity, but to the viability of embryos."

According to Diaz, slow-curing beans creates an even flavor, eliminating harsh notes. And, he adds, "With roasting coffee, slow roasting at relatively low temperatures has proven to be an effective roasting technique in achieving better heat transfer onto coffee beans for sweet and full body notes."

Diaz, a Mexican by birth who earned his Ph.D. at the London School of Economics, doesn't champion slow as the only means to success in the coffee industry. He does, however, realize the value of slow in terms of producing quality coffee. And he's not alone. There are hundreds of coffee professionals around the world using slow to improve quality from seed to cup. And while the practices themselves are fascinating, the key to the resiliency and integrity of slow coffee is the people stewarding the movement.

LEARNING HOW TO ROAST coffee is a slow process. There's no right way to do it. There's no school for coffee roasting, and the Culinary Institute of America in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., doesn't offer classes in it. New roasters need to be students of the industry, building connections with as many different roasters as possible. Understanding the science of endothermic and exothermic changes, dehydration, hydrolysis, caramelization, expansion and bean development are important, but equally important is an understanding of the local community—the *genus loci* of the industry landscape. When roasting coffee, there is a nonlinear, musical dimension to learning that involves cooperation, networks, and a willingness to be small and to ask others to embrace small. Like the roast profile template, there are vertical lines and horizontal lines of understanding.

And still, despite the value of slow in our day-to-day work, life is still largely shaped by the constant drive to be faster and larger. We mistake faster and larger for more *efficient*. Often, we can reach our destination sooner by moving slower. And often, we can do



Doyo cooperative ledger in Jimma, Ethiopia. | photo by Benjamin Myers

so while wasting fewer resources and making the process more efficient. Too often, we see our position in the industry in relation to a global schematic, dominated by massive, top-down hierarchies—multinational corporations, government bureaucracies, the NY "C" market. This is, however, only one way of seeing our industry.

IN 1941, GERMAN INVENTOR Peter Schlumbohm created the Chemex coffeemaker. As a notable design author of the era put it, Schlumbohm's Chemex was a "synthesis of logic and madness [...]" one of the few modern designs for which one can feel affection as well as admiration." Schlumbohm wasn't some coffee overlord at the time of Chemex's invention. Legend has it that, while living in New York City, he became disturbed by the stale, diner-style, automat coffee culture of the times and wanted to explore concepts of Gestalt psychology and Bauhaus movement principles by designing a coffee maker.

Slow is often a nonlinear approach to a problem. By exploring Bauhaus and Gestalt psychology, Schlumbohm was demonstrating that sometimes the best route between point A and point B is over the river and through the woods. Slow does not, however, mean using sticks and stones to light a bonfire.

Many of the most promising slow connections today use advanced technology. But, from a certain view, they can be seen as a return to a much older tradition. Keith Gehrke, founder and lead designer at Able Brewing, expressed similar design aspirations in his hopes for his Kone Brewing System as Schlumbohm did for the Chemex in 1941. In a May 2012 Kickstarter campaign, Gehrke expressed a desire to create a reusable filter that "not only brewed a great cup of coffee, but *looked* great on your countertop." When Gehrke launched his campaign, he was hoping to raise \$5,000. Instead, he took in a remarkable \$155,162. Not a single corporation funded the project. Rather, 1,295 different people contributed, sometimes as little as \$25. Gehrke met his \$5,000 goal just a few hours into the 30-day donation window. The people had expressed support for integrating slow and design—and Gehrke's work is just that.

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Keith Gehrke, founder and lead designer at Able Brewing. | courtesy of Able Brewing

When Gehrke set out to make the first prototype for his Kone, he was doing so with the person in mind, not anonymous consumers. He wanted to build something for himself. He wanted to make something practical, and, through a natural progression of development, this grew into the current Kone Brewing System. At the time of publication of this piece, Gehrke expressed that he was “running behind” on completing the project. For Gehrke, it is more important to get it right than to get it done. “Each brewer we make is unique, handmade and just a little bit different from the next,” he says. “Our supporters on Kickstarter weren’t giving money for a product, they were giving money to support a process.” With this kind of understanding of the people’s role in the marketplace, Gehrke’s Kone may one day have a place next to Schlumbohm’s Chemex in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There are other examples of a generation of craft in brewing technology emerging. Despite massive demand for his product, the Blossom One, lead technician Jeremy Kuempel decided to release only 11 of his brewing systems in year one of sales. Kuempel wrote “simply having great technology isn’t enough, we’re now reaching out to the community at large and eliciting input from those who are truly crazy about coffee.” While integrating technology, Kuempel isn’t overlooking the slower responses from people over time.



WE ARE BY NOW accustomed to the cult of speed—so much so that the very notion of slow seems awkward and misguided as a way to produce more efficient systems. How could slow possibly improve your business as a coffee producer?

Unlike so many of today’s idealists, the people behind the slow movement in coffee actually believe that we can solve the problems that confront us as a society, and they believe that the slow process will be the key to those solutions. Journalist Carl Honore’s new book, *The Slow Fix: Solve Problems, Work Smarter and Live Better in a World Addicted to Speed*, addresses quick patch jobs versus slow fixes. For a chapter titled “Power to the People,” Honore spent months studying the micro-mill revolution among Costa Rica coffee producers. He writes, “The micro-mill revolution blends these bottom-up and top-down approaches to add another dimension to the Slow Fix. In other words, it often makes sense to put problem-solving in the hands of those who live with the problem every day, to give people at the bottom the chance to call the shots.”

In *The Social Conquest of Earth*, biologist and author E.O. Wilson writes, “Important decisions in egalitarian societies are made during communal feasts, festivals, and religious celebrations.” Those who support slow development understand the rewards of putting power into the hands of communities and sharing knowledge. A good



A coffee farmer in Ethiopia's Agaro region. | photo by Benjamin Myers

example of such collaboration is happening in the Agaro region of western Ethiopia.

On a visit to Ethiopia in early October 2012, I traveled far west into the mountains to the Duromina cooperative. In 2012, Duromina had been crowned winner of the annual Taste of Harvest competition by the African Fine Coffees Association. In other words, it was selected

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as the best coffee in Africa for 2012. This feat was not accomplished overnight but took a slow road of establishing cooperatives run by the people of the Agaro region, who had no experience running wet mills.

At the cooperative, I met with Beyene Desta, a project consultant with Technoserve, a nonprofit that offers cooperative development in rural areas around the world. By providing financial assistance and technical support, Technoserve is putting the power in the hands of the people to build and operate small-scale wet mills to service cooperatives. The distribution of power has shifted from larger mills to smaller mills. Slow is embraced as being more efficient. There are currently 14 cooperatives in the Agaro region working with Technoserve, as well as 16 wet mills. Farmers in the region



Beyene Desta, project consultant with Technoserve, at Duromenia | photo by Benjamin Myers

are able to sell cherry to the regional cooperative, and, in turn, the cooperative sells the processed coffee to a buyer abroad. Technoserve facilitates the relationship between cooperative and coffee buyer. By helping these small cooperatives establish a local identity and connect with the international market, they are creating a stronger and more resilient coffee-producing society in western Ethiopia.

According to Desta, the Technoserve wet-mill design being replicated in the area with Penagos depulping machines, water channels, and covered drying areas costs approximately \$70,000 to build. As a nonprofit organization, Technoserve is investing in people and the chance to empower small farmers. And it is working, not simply because Technoserve is helping to provide financial and technical support, but because the organization is taking important community decisions and putting the people in front of the process.



Benjamin Myers, left, and Beyene Desta, right | photo by Benjamin Myers

FOR THE PAST TWO centuries, we have lived in a culture defined by passive consumerism. Brands seeking high profit margins didn't seem artificial to us because we couldn't imagine an alternative. But now we can. At the World Institute of Slowness in Kristiansand, Norway, Geir Berthelsen has trademarked the term SlowCoffee because he believes that a slower planet is the way of the future. After studying the works of esteemed Norwegian philosopher Guttorm Fløistad, Berthelsen shifted his attention from a lucrative business in global consulting to creating a slow revolution.

By trademarking the term SlowCoffee, Berthelsen drew a distinct demarcation between "slow" and "direct trade." From its onset, the decision to not brand "direct trade" was intentional. This has made for many great (and ambiguous) results, leading some to question, stretch and manipulate the veracity of the "direct trade" claim. When



Geir Berthelsen of World Institute of Slowness, Norway | photo by Benjamin Myers

you search the term "direct trade" in Wikipedia, it states: "There is no agreed definition of the term..." No one owns "direct trade" and nobody stewards its usage. What kind of message is being sent to

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consumers when they are being given a marketing term that has no agreed-upon meaning?

In trademarking SlowCoffee, the World Institute of Slowness has protected the term's meaning. "By protecting the brand, we have also given the term a structural integrity that supports the development of SlowCoffee as a commercial construct that can stand by itself," says Berthelsen. The World Institute of Slowness seeks to put people first. In a November 2010 column published by CNN, Berthelsen wrote, "The

Industrial Revolution gave us many good things, among them the ability to create large cities, and feeding enough people to populate them. But in its aftermath our culture has developed a core focus based on the consumer and not the person as an individual."

The power of slow is found in its inclusive nature; it's not simply some abstraction sketched on a bar napkin after a fourth beer or cooked up in a grad-school seminar on radical thought. The current avant-garde of the slow coffee movement is making use of simplicity,



Outside Culture Espresso in New York City. | photo by Melanie Fidler



Inside Culture Espresso. | photo by Melanie Fidler



Both photos: At the Karogoto wet mill in Kenya. | photos by Benjamin Myers

transparency and consciousness—values long ago proven effective in creating community. In the heart of midtown New York City, Culture Espresso owner Jody LoCascio understands just that.

Despite the fact that he oversees one of the busier shops in the city, LoCascio has consistently offered a slow coffee experience. V-6os, Kyoto drippers and baristas empowered to throw away shots they are

not happy with are par for the course. This is an example for any coffee shop owner in the United States who thinks consumers are too busy to want handcrafted coffee. Culture Espresso pulls it off with grace and ease on one of America's busiest streets. Still, there is something at Culture that goes beyond the repeatable protocols of brewing guidelines

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and measured doses. The social dynamic of Culture Espresso is reminiscent of the Penny Universities of 18th-century London. Jewelry designers and real-estate moguls interface as vinyl records play through aged speakers under a glass chandelier. Conversation floats freely between people huddled in close quarters, and it seems almost rude to whip out a laptop and isolate yourself behind the

screen. Baristas, conscious of where the coffee comes from, are able to recite place of origin, and the setting has an endearing simplicity. The whole affair of making coffee for people appears to be about addressing the *person*, not a nameless consumer.

It's not just a great cup of coffee that people are after. They are looking for a meaningful exchange. Too many shops get

hung up on the technical aspects of the slow bar and forget the vital impact of the human engagement that happens as brew drips through filter.



ON A HOT OCTOBER DAY at the Karogoto wet mill in the Nyeri region of Kenya, an elderly woman from a small farm carries a bulging white sack of cherries over her shoulder. She is wearing a white dress, and colorful scarves adorn her head. In the midday sun, I kneel near her over the gnarled concrete patio as she unpacks the day's harvest. I ask if I can take her photo and she agrees, smiling. I realize then that the simple notion of *coffee connecting people* is something that our value-management applications often overlook. We have no lines in our profit and loss statement for the importance of an American man meeting a Kenyan woman where she is, exchanging a smile and snapping a photo. The relationship's person to person, human to nature, nature to machine, coffee to country—all of these need slow work.

For Berthelsen and his SlowCoffee project, when we talk about slowness we talk about telling the true story behind a coffee. Not a synthetic story, like a blend name or a brand name, but the real story of who produced the coffee, where the coffee was produced, how the coffee was produced, when the coffee was produced and what the coffee is produced from (varietals). Berthelsen believes that, as consumers, we have been anesthetized into a form of passive agreement with not only environmental degradation but social degradation as well, and that it is up to a new generation of producers to rise up and demand that the true story of products be told in order to awaken ourselves to the true cost and value of coffee production.



SIX YEARS AGO, Austrian Norbert Niederhauser moved to Santiago de Cali in western Colombia. Working with the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), his project goal was to link farmers to markets. When he arrived, the materials were inadequate

and the project outlook appeared grim. Today, Niederhauser is the CEO of Cropster, a company that won the best origin product award at the 2012 Specialty Coffee Association of America conference. Cropster helps improve access to information and transparency for small and mid-sized businesses along the coffee supply chain.

Niederhauser is also a believer in the benefit of slowing down the coffee experience. "You have to take your time in diving into specialty coffee," he says. "Specialty coffee is essentially about taking a little more time. Time to know a little more about your espresso. Time to prepare coffee in a decent way ... the specialty coffee is about stories but not only stories, it's about taking time to understand these stories. There are beautiful photos, but behind these beautiful photos are often a dirty side and a need for a willingness to explore a different world."

He adds: "I hear people talk about consistency and reproducibility, but with specialty coffee this changes almost every day. You have to slow down and embrace the changes. Be open to the change."

What Cropster is doing is helping to organize diversity of the experience. The company is creating two-way values, releasing information not only with the consumer at the center, but with a shared value oriented at the producer getting and being able to provide information. In December 2012, Cropster published its first book, *Specialty Coffee—Managing Quality*. The goal of the book, Niederhauser says, is to make things slower, to organize details and put a new understanding within reach.



IT'S EASY TO OBSERVE the simple ways in which slow processes can improve coffee's quality. We know about hand-picking coffee over strip-picking, and most of us have probably experienced the vegetal underdevelopment of coffee that is roasted too quickly. The greater questions our industry is facing with regard to slowing down global production are

still ripe for the picking among the future generation of slow coffee pioneers. Like its predecessor the Slow Food Movement, led by the likes of Carlo Petrini and Alice Waters, Slow Coffee won't be an instant success, but in the long run, the benefits will be proven by the brave souls willing to go against the grain—those willing to gather the finer moments by outstretched hand

and elongated heart, bringing them back upon return, and sharing them around a roast.



BENJAMIN MYERS is the owner and founder of 1000 Faces Coffee, an Athens, Ga.-based micro-roaster. 1000 Faces was a winner of a 2013 Good Food Award, which honors sustainability and craftsmanship. Contact him at roasterben@gmail.com.

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