

Shared interest

Harnessing the Power of Collaboration

How Rick Peyser, Virmax and Other Coffee Industry Innovators
Are Re-Imagining the Value Chain

by Benjamin Myers

“GOOD IDEAS may not want to be free, but they want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reinvent themselves by crossing conceptual borders. They want to complete each other as much as they want to compete.”

—Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*

In 2010, a coffee man from Vermont traveled from Mexico to Nicaragua with a film crew to document a food shortage epidemic, known as *los meses flacos* (“the thin months”), that afflicts coffee farmers across Central America each year when the harvest cycle winds down and the rainy months set in. That man was Rick Peyser, a man with more than 25 years of experience in the coffee industry. Peyser is also director of social advocacy and supply chain community outreach at Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and may very well be considered the originator of a radical new trend in coffee: pre-competitive collaboration.

Peyser returned to America with the film “After the Harvest: Fighting Hunger in the Coffeelands” in hand and rallied his colleagues from across the industry to join in a collective action, separate from any marketing concerns, designed to offer relief to farmers afflicted by food shortage. This group of coffee industry leaders, known as the Coffeelands Food Security Coalition, partnered with the global humanitarian organization Mercy Corps and the Nicaraguan organization Asociación Aldea Global

Jinotega to equip families in the Jinotega Department—where 60 percent of Nicaragua’s coffee is grown—with improved farming and business techniques to help them feed their families year-round.

Often, in the specialty coffee world, there is the temptation to operate in isolation, in the interest of protecting trade secrets or relationships with producers. But Rick Peyser’s example of coming together to solve common problems in the industry before we compete in the market—to collaborate before we compete—strengthens agents up and down the coffee value chain. Secure, well-fed farmers have more focus and energy to dedicate to their crops, making yield and quality better for everyone involved. Peyser and his cohorts show that by acting cooperatively, we can serve the overall interest of our brands. This pre-competitive collaborative spirit can be applied in a number of ways to serve the longevity and profitability of specialty coffee producers everywhere.

continued on page 42



Coffee ceremony in Ethiopia. | photo by Metasebia Yoseph



Rick Peyser in Soz'il, Department of El Quiché, Guatemala. photo courtesy of Rick Peyser



Sharing a meal in Ethiopia. | photo by Metasebia Yoseph

On the road out of Boston last April, news of the marathon bombings rattled through my car radio, and I found myself needing some air. I stopped at a shaded rest area to distract myself from the horror on the airwaves. Somewhere off I-84, I dug into my belongings and pulled out magazines I had gathered at this year's SCAA conference. In the pages of *The Specialty Coffee Chronicle* there was an interview with Rick Peyser. It was here that I first read the term: Pre-Competitive Collaboration. Asked what he would like to see change in our industry, Peyser replied:

"I would like to see small-scale producers of fine coffee receive a better return on their investment so that they, their children and future generations have the same opportunity to advance in life as those who consume enticing cups of their coffee. I believe the path to realize this vision starts with *pre-competitive collaborative* efforts within our industry."

I met Rick Peyser in Nicaragua in February 2008. I had fallen some hours earlier on the slopes of a muddy hill and caught my arm on a branch. My shirt was bloodied, and there was dirt smeared down my backside as if I'd attempted to slide into third base. As I gingerly made my way back to the estate I was visiting, my guide nudged me on the shoulder and pointed Peyser out to me as if to say, "Quit grumbling. Here's something more important." Peyser was emerging from the main dining hall. His green shirt was pressed and his white hair was neatly groomed. My guide looked at him like a sort of coffee demi-god, and I felt the cool, lowly pang of being a sloppy nobody. That all changed the moment I shook his hand. His demeanor was endearing, empowering, and ultimately, welcoming.

After reading about Peyser's vision, I reached out to him this past summer to learn more about what he meant. "Essentially, it's about bringing people together to make an impact larger than you can accomplish on your own," he told me. "It's about leaving your brand in the hallway and sitting down with peers to tackle some pressing issues in our industry."

As our conversation meandered, Peyser mentioned that he had participated in the Boston Marathon this year. In fact, he finished the race just three minutes before the bombs went off. We both commented on how amazing it was to see the Boston community rally after the event. In my moment of naïveté, I asked Peyser directly: Why wait? Why is it that, in our society, we wait until after something horrific has happened to show our massive heart? Time and time again, we see a hyperbolic post-trauma reaction to catastrophic events large and small that pales in comparison to the preventive collaborative measures taken. This question has been a recurring theme since 9/11, yet no one seems to know the answer.

Peyser had the experience and wisdom to know that the slow, pervasive ailments of our world aren't often the headline news of the day. For a group to step forward in a pre-emptive way is challenging. Our selfish gene doesn't always think that collaborating is the best path forward, and often the barriers are more than just psychological. Real resources need to be invested into collaboration, and justification for these resources can be difficult to find, especially when the bottom line is a concern. Sometimes the economic correlation appears weak at best. Further, problems like seasonal hunger are daunting to address. But the fact is that we cannot wait any longer. For today, maybe more

so than ever in the course of human history, we have the ability to be face-to-face with an overt understanding that not acting is, in a sense, becoming silently complicit with the damage caused by tragedy. Moreover, we have proven as an industry that when we come together outside the field of battle, amazing things happen. If you choose not to participate, someone else will.

Perhaps the single most important barrier to group problem-solving is the fact that the solution appears more complex as the number of people involved grows. This makes stakeholders skeptical about the value of getting in the room together to try. The act of collaboration is something that the developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello has spent his life researching. Tomasello is co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. In his 2009 book, *Why We Cooperate*, he shares his theories on how human cooperation evolved and suggests it is a defining characteristic of our species. In examining the pre-programmed quality of cooperation in human interactions, Tomasello studies the cooperative actions of pre-verbal children, generally 12 months to 24 months old, and compares their behavior to that of apes in identically structured trials. The remarkable results offer documentation that even pre-verbal children have a predilection to cooperate and help others. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, tend to act in ways that increase their own individual gain. While the jury is still out on whether working together to help is an innate behavioral trait that human beings are born with, Tomasello does articulate findings that, as children, we develop something he calls "shared intentionality." He goes on to postulate that this "shared intentionality" lies at the basis of an evolved human society.

For Tomasello, "Humans putting their hands together in shared cooperative activities are thus the originators of human culture." On the other hand, we can roughly extrapolate from evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' notion of the innate "selfish gene," that the instincts to accumulate wealth and forward our own interests is what drives competition to the point of trying to exclude working with others. In the coffee industry, that selfishness might be what makes us want to serve our own brand rather than the good of the whole industry. In the safe middle road we can agree that while cooperation is ingrained in us, so is self-interest, leaving us forever in the lurch: Is collaboration in our best interest?

Greed and self-interest are bad only if they are used to bad ends. Both innate human personality traits can be transmuted into the service of a greater good. The selfish desire of having a great cup of coffee can be made to inspire group action that benefits all. As farmers, roasters and baristas compete for center stage, the verbiage is limited to state that this constant personal striving is nothing more than the dislocated, somnambulant effort of a capitalistic zombie. The bright stars that come with unending service awaken sleepwalkers the world over, thus creating a greater pool of aware consumers with whom our industry can connect and ultimately collaborate.

On a serendipitous winter evening in 2000, two bankers bumped into each other at a house party in London. The two men had remembered meeting some years earlier at the University in Bogotá, and through the course of the evening an idea was hatched between



Sorting coffee in Ethiopia. | photo by Metasebia Yoseph

the two of them: they would start a business importing tropical fruits into London. The business would be called Virmax. It was a word that had no meaning.

When Alejandro Cadena and Giancarlo Ghiretti made a pact to work together, a special collaboration was born. Though neither of them knew it at the time, their casual conversation at this party would eventually spawn the defining project in the development of specialty coffee in Colombia in the new millennium. Virmax, a business born in a single night, now internationally selects and exports more than 100 containers of specialty coffee a year from eight different Latin American countries. It employs more than 100 people and works directly with nearly 2,000 family farmers. The company operates 19 receiving warehouses, where coffees are cupped daily during harvest season. The company owns a special dry mill in the city of Armenia, in addition to importing outfits in the United States, Australia and Europe. In 2013, Virmax sold the most expensive Colombian coffee ever outside of the competitive landscape of auctions—a directly traded lot between Oswaldo Acevedo's Hacienda El Roble and Proud Mary Coffee Roasters. The 40-pound micro-lot sold for \$130 per pound green (or \$631 per pound roasted) and an unbelievable \$30 per cup at Proud Mary. How did they do this?

More and more companies around the world have realized the value of developing capacity to connect farmers with roasters. Importers like Sustainable Harvest and Café Imports, exporters like Inconexus and Banexport, NGOs like TechnoServe and ACIDI/VOCA are all examples of companies doing avant-garde work in navigating collaboration on a global scale. How do companies learn what it takes to make this a reality? For Virmax, the process of weaning off the old model of doing business began in 2001, with Cadena asking specialty roasters in London what they wanted to see in the coffees coming from Colombia. At the same time, he went directly to the farms in Colombia and offered an alternative way of doing business. By weaving together a plethora of micro-regions and producers groups, the company succeeded in creating an environment in which regions and groups don't compete but instead participate in a mutually beneficial network of relationships.

continued on page 44



Top three photos from Colombia. photos by Benjamin Myers
Bottom photo from Ethiopia. photo by Metasebia Yoseph

In the pre-millennium days of Colombian coffee, roasters weren't able to receive micro-lots like those of Virmax's Las Mingas project, which is responsible for delivering Omar Arango's back-to-back Good Food Award-winning Finca San Luis to Gimme! Coffee in Ithaca, N.Y. But in the era of relationship coffee, the process of creating great coffee isn't about running apart from a pack; it's about bringing the pack around the campfire and working together in a concerted, collaborative effort.

On a densely clouded morning in July, I met with Cadena in a small downtown restaurant in Bogotá. Having spent the previous days touring a number of projects that Virmax supports in the area, I was already impressed by what his team of coffee professionals was accomplishing. The venerable army is both youthful and serious, cupping with fervor and precision. We met on Colombia's national Independence Day, a fitting time to meet a man of such commitment to creating a deeper understanding of the greater potentiality of specialty coffee; here he was on a Saturday, when his country was indoors and the streets were empty, explaining to a young roaster how Virmax employs a collaborative approach as the secret to its success.

Cadena, a man of contrasts, wears a pressed, collared shirt and a half-grown beard. A short man, he looks as if he could be either a wandering mystic or a cosmopolitan. He has spent the better part of the decade traveling to the remote regions of Colombia and other parts of Latin America to meet with producers of great coffee. He connects directly with people and gives them sound feedback on how to increase the value behind their daily toil.

In 2010, after 10 years in operation, Virmax realized that the environment for trading coffee was rapidly changing. Roasters were increasingly looking to work with producers, and the traditional role of the importer might not be the best arrangement. Virmax then began the process of creating Caravela Coffee to import coffee to North America. Now as a vertically integrated export-import company, the role of Caravela is to facilitate the building of relationships between producers and roasters and to manage the logistics of moving the coffee from one to the other. This allows Virmax and the producers to have a more direct relationship with the roasters that are purchasing the coffee. Cadena's business philosophy could be summarized as "thinking of everybody." The ultimate goal of his business is to bring prosperity to everyone involved by building direct relationships between producer groups and coffee buyers. When he eventually leaves Virmax, he hopes to leave behind relationships between producer groups and roasters that are self-sustaining. Lowering his voice in a moment of seriousness, he said, "Sourcing coffee is not buying coffee. Sourcing coffee is developing relationships."

It is for this reason that he encourages roasters to visit coffee producers before the next harvest has begun and not during the current harvest. It is before the work begins that collaboration makes its deepest impact.

Our specialty coffee roasting community is young. It can be argued that our trade began just 30 years ago when Donald Schoenholt, Ted Lingle, Phyllis Baldenhoffer, Peter McLaughlin and John Randall met at the Louisa Hotel in San Francisco to draft the first SCAA charter bylaws. Coffee's history as an industry has been one of intense secretiveness, but with the advent of the SCAA, the first cracks in the wall of exclusivity appeared. Developing international standards to share with the world of coffee initiated a cross-cultural language that could enable concrete communication between an exporter in Java and a roaster in Norway. For an industry as young as ours, focusing on competition over collaboration is a hindrance to development. Still, we see an increase in roasters wanting to travel alone to origins to protect investments into particular producer groups. As companies expand into new marketplaces, we are competing for business that was once securely controlled by a few actors. Traveling solo makes it easy to protect trade secrets, but this travel time could be used for a greater purpose—collaborating with each other to develop a larger base of consumers who are

able to grasp what sets specialty coffee apart from commodity coffee. In doing research for this article, I decided to pop in on a number of collaborative projects in different places to harvest some inspiration.

Conventional wisdom dictates that controlling and protective measures are integral to the successful usage of resource and innovation—trademarks, patents, copyrights, lawyers. But when it comes to collaboration, sharing and open systems are the currency in today's roasting community. Christopher Schooley is a master collaborator and a man who knows a lot about roasting coffee. At Coffee Shrub, he plays a central role in helping coffee roasters around the country explore different methods for unlocking the magic of beans from around the world. Schooley has been an integral part in the development of the Roasters Guild and is no slouch when it comes to understanding his craft.

After numerous e-mail exchanges with him, in which Schooley helped me understand how to make minor alterations to my own roasting style, I became curious about what sort of collaborative efforts he was taking part in elsewhere around our community. He turned me on to an interesting group of coffee professionals in the greater Colorado area that operates under the banner of Rocky Mountain Craft Coffee Alliance (RMCCA). In the summer of 2013, the alliance organized workshops geared toward improving everyone's product by focusing on communicating positively with customers, helping members earn Barista Guild certification and understanding beverages from a cross-disciplinary standpoint. Schooley was adamant that the specialty coffee industry could learn from looking at what the craft beer community in Colorado had accomplished through collaboration. For Schooley, "craft is community," and without a community of people working together on developing a craft, the process is individualistic and ultimately futile.

In San Diego, a city not particularly established as a hot spot for specialty coffee, I learned of another community of roasters who are working together outside the norm. Six roasters have banded together to form a collective body that not only shares information, but works toward a common goal totally independent of the coffee community. Together, they practice the art and science of different brew methodologies to raise money for the Wounded Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Warrior Foundation. The collective group of roasters plan ticketed events under a shared roof. These events act as fundraisers for the cause, and the proceeds go to the foundation. Member Chuck Patton, owner of Bird Rock Coffee Roasters, has a clear vision of how coming together across competitive lines is a way to not only broaden communities' coffee knowledge bank, but also to address some of the greater needs of society. Coffee can be a great tool for activating awareness.

Patton is also an advocate for roasters traveling together to origin as a way of reaching pre-competitive collaboration. In 2010, he realized this on a trip with Jeff Taylor, CEO of PT's Coffee Roasting Co., to Bolivia. While traveling with another roaster operating out of a market that did not compete with Bird Rock's primary market, Patton says it was the first time his company was able to exercise non-competitive group buying power to procure a lot of coffee that Bird Rock might not have otherwise been able to secure on its own. It's more than just economic or qualitative reward for Patton, however:



At a farm in Colombia. | photo by Stephanie Ratanas

"One of the important things about traveling with other roasters is the fun that comes with building a relationship with someone," he says. "Ultimately, it can be one of the more enjoyable experiences of working in coffee."

Sometimes we operate in isolated circles, where although we might have the coffee job everyone wants to know about at parties, we don't always find enough room for connecting with our peers in the industry. Physicist and systems theorist Fritjof Capra says that finding connections is a key to an organism's survival in the web of life.

When I sat down with Capra at a small cafe in Berkeley, Calif., to speak in depth about his work, I learned that this Austrian-born, American physicist had spent the better part of his adult life teaching students and readers to realize how deeply connected they are, not just to one another, but to the greater ecosystem. In his 2004 book, *Hidden Connections*, he wrote, "One of the key insights of the systems approach has been the realization that the network is a pattern that is common to all of life. Wherever we see life, we see networks." Capra is the founder of the Berkeley-based Center for Ecoliteracy, an organization that is deliberate in creating space to foster an understanding of our place in the greater web of life. Bringing this back to coffee, I began to think of where and how we go about finding room for fostering connection.

In Ethiopia, the coffee ceremony is a rite of passage open to all members of the community. At its core, the ceremony is a social function. Its powers are made manifest by people coming together to drink out of a shared clay pot. The fragrance of incense coals fills the surrounding space, and participants sit on low stump-like chairs. This is a way of drinking coffee that is not about a fast consumption, but about holding space for people to connect with one another around coffee. Metasebia Yoseph, the founder and chief creative director of the innovation consultancy Muse Collective, did her master's thesis work focusing on the Ethiopian coffee ceremony. For Yoseph, the process surrounding the Ethiopian coffee ceremony is essentially a

continued on page 46

performance art piece on the concept of pre-competitive collaboration. The Ethiopian coffee ceremony bridges together all strata of the economic and social hierarchies. It is a rite of all Ethiopian peoples to participate in the ceremony on equal footing. It creates a space for people to come together and share their ideas, visions and problems—a think tank painted in the hue of antiquity. Yoseph is currently working on a transmedia project documenting the phenomena of the Ethiopian coffee ceremony. Her book, set to be published by the end of 2013, is appropriately titled, *A Culture of Coffee*.

There are signs that the coffee shops in the West are starting to embrace settings where natural networks for social dialogue are being reclaimed. In the summer of 2012, Murat Uyaroglu opened his well-received Hungry Ghost Cafe on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. A kinetic man of Turkish heritage, he was adamant about the development of a new cafe space where laptop use is minimized. Uyaroglu created a central seating arrangement where customers would be encouraged to speak to one another. Guests are encouraged to drink their coffee at a family-style table. The ambiance naturally facilitates meeting a stranger and forming a new bond. While some consider the Internet the world's largest coffeehouse, the roots of great collaborative projects begin in person, face-to-face.

Across the country in the Mission District of San Francisco, the venerable Andrew Barnett, the founder and former owner of Ecco Caffe, is opening Linea Caffe. Barnett's approach to coffee has always been one that strongly embraces collaboration. In his early days, he sourced micro-lots with various like-minded roasters, and today Barnett is teaming up with Anthony Myint of the James Beard Award-winning Mission Chinese Food posse to offer a unique menu of espresso drinks and specialty waffles in a 292-square-foot space. Furthermore, Barnett is crafting his coffee by toll roasting at Highwire Coffee Roasters across the bay. Barnett thinks that toll roasting is a beautiful example of people sharing resources and maximizing the investment required to open up a coffee roaster.

Although toll roasting isn't new, there is a new kind of definition emerging surrounding the phenomenon. The traditional concept behind toll roasting was a service agreement where one person would pay someone else to roast coffee that he or she owned. Today, toll roasting is becoming much more participatory. More small upstarts and smart cafe owners are renting space at roasteries when the primary business isn't in need of the facility. There are many roasters that are not currently operating at maximum capacity and equally



Colombia. | photo by Benjamin Myers

as many enthusiasts looking to get involved in the magical craft of roasting their own. The overhead of developing a complete roasting facility is often too big a burden for a small coffee shop.

Former Intelligentsia employee Steven Mierisch has taken toll roasting to a new level in the producer-centric Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn. Late in the summer of 2013, Mierisch opened a facility where coffee shops could rent time on his roasters. For Mierisch, the distinction between *toll roasting* and *renting time* is important. When explaining the concept behind his new business Mierisch tells potential collaborators, "This is not a toll-roasting facility; I will not perform the service of roasting coffee for you." In other words, there is a new participatory nature to the endeavor that is breaking older molds in the way of conducting the business of sharing resources.

I learned about this project from Ed Kaufmann, director of roasting at Joe the Art of Coffee in New York, and I was eager to track down Mierisch for an interview. I soon found out that Mierisch was now a man high in demand and difficult to get in touch with. When *New York Times* contributor Oliver Strand broke the story about Pulley Collective in July 2013, it was clear to me that a tipping point in toll roasting had been met with a overwhelming sense of excitement among coffee insiders in America's greatest metropolis.

At \$850 a week in rental fees, Pulley Collective might seem expensive to some, but compared to the costs of renting a facility in Brooklyn of similar capacity, it is a smoking deal. Mierisch is now a pioneer in the new economy of peer-sharing in coffee, though his network is rooted in 15 years of experience with the global coffee community and a learned appreciation for what roasters are looking for. The Mierisch family is participating in the arena of innovation; as a coffee farm that strives to be a powerhouse of quality in Nicaragua, the Fincas Mierisch were some of the first producers in the region to separate varieties and conduct their own private auction for coffee via the Internet, a platform established largely through the Alliance for Coffee Excellence (ACE). Mierisch points out that his experience in volunteering with ACE, the Cup of Excellence, and working with Intelligentsia were major influences in driving his family's farm toward new levels of quality. Proven here is that by borrowing from the spirit of innovation, peer-sharing in coffee can establish new landscapes to enact pre-competitive collaborative endeavors.

Working together is not something new. Neighbors have been coming together to raise barns long before there were Facebook pages to organize events. One can even argue that the fabric of neighborhood community has been diminished by the Internet; local connections are weaker as global connections have become stronger. A good rule for establishing good collaborative action is: *Show up*. Get together in person. Occupy space with another individual or group that is working on activities that excite you. Allow time for the magic of sitting together to turn small talk into big ideas. At the Esalen, a famed human potential institute on the rocky shores of Big Sur in California, longtime group leader John Heider would say, "If there is silence, allow for it to grow. Don't fill it with haste. Something important will emerge out of holding the group form."

When it comes to roasting, collaboration may seem unnecessary. The majority of the information that a roaster brings to the machine—altitudes, varieties, moisture content, age of harvest, processing

methods, regional characteristics of green coffee—is in the brain long before the burlap is sliced open. The roaster can apply this knowledge toward producing top-quality roasts. Still, it is not only the gathering of such information that is important. A roaster must cross-reference this information against additional consumer feedback—information that comes not from data but from process—in order to skillfully apply expertise. For this reason, it's important for roasters to get out, get together, share experiences, give advice and mentor one another. Sometimes the gathering of these strange characters can sound more like a political debate than the bohemian dialogue that great artists revel in. The best roasters I know can communicate like Zen monks, filmmakers, marksmen, horticulturists and machinists all in one. These bizarre commentaries are the proverbs you will one day end up repeating to one another.

For today's coffee professional, the rising emphasis on collaboration offers a real opportunity. As the stories of Virmax, the Rocky Mountain Craft Coffee Alliance and Rick Peyser demonstrate, pre-competitive collaboration has much to offer as a tool for conducting business. Companies, organizations and individuals that make the effort to reach beyond their walls to explore the potential of group innovation harvest a bountiful crop when they create spaces like the Ethiopian coffee ceremony and Murat Uyaroglu's central table. Leaders of these groups are able to develop trusting bonds with external collaborators, as Steven Mierisch is doing. These developments are building a new, vibrant coffee shed that is storing and creating value more effectively than the secretive methodologies where outside participation is unwelcome.

For baristas and small coffee farms, this may signal the dawning of a new era in coffee. For those lowest on the coffee value chain, collaboration across brands and articles of ownership can be an economical and refreshing take on what it means to work in coffee. We have proven in recent history that peer-networking can produce an equitable coffee system, an economy of specialized producers of fine coffee that swap and exchange services for the greater good of the industry, be they humanitarian, ecological, qualitative or mechanical.

Perhaps one of the most relevant questions related to collaboration is value. Will pre-competitive collaboration increase the value of our work? Coffee is a product that has been historically undervalued, and its global workforce has borne the brunt of this economic paradigm. Who is to blame for the fact that the majority of those in the industry work hard for little money? For many of us, the low return on investment might be the single most pressing problem. Let's assume that the key to solving this problem and making a good decision is not finding that one right answer, but one simple step: *participate*. As more people begin to participate in the revolution of the coffee workplace, there will be a profound benefit; the better we understand how this machine works, the better we'll get at operating it.

One of the best ongoing collaborative projects in the industry right now is being done under the banner of the Coffee Quality Institute. If you are looking for an outlet to vest your collaborative heart into, I strongly suggest going on their website and volunteering for the Coffee Corps program. CQI is doing cutting-edge collaborative work worldwide. Recently, the program completed a three-year technical



Coffee ceremony in Ethiopia. | photo by Metasebia Yoseph

training and assistance as part of the economic development nonprofit ACDI/VOCA's project, Strengthening the Coffee Value Chain, in Peru. Over the course of three years, CQI sent nearly 20 consultants and volunteers to collaborate directly with stakeholders in the development of Peru's coffee industry. Workshop topics included Q-grading, trainer training, barista skills, specialty coffee buying, processing techniques, selection, storage and roasting. The cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary groups that CQI and its Peruvian partners are facilitating are empowering our industry like never before. The act is pre-competitive and landmark.

As a new year beckons for our industry, the winds of time are blowing in strong favor of a change in our approach to doing business. There are so many ways for us to work together. Like Schooley, we can work to institutionalize craft production in our local markets, raising the bar of what consumers expect from their coffee and generating interest in the specialty trade. Like Chuck Patton and Bird Rock Coffee Roasters, we can use collaborative effort to address social concerns, perhaps finding new customers in communities, like those of the veterans in the EOD Warrior Foundation, that we don't traditionally associate with craft coffee consumption.

On a broader scale, people like Rick Peyser and companies like Virmax are undeniable examples that collaboration can make great strides toward improving conditions for all actors on a large scale. Whether it's helping to stem the tremendous human suffering caused by yearly periods of hunger and simultaneously equipping coffee farmers to do their work better—like Peyser—or using a global network of collaborators to help coffee farmers in Colombia meet the demands of consumers in London—like Virmax—collaboration between competitors can pay dividends in the form of efficiency and quality.

The evidence in favor of collaboration is indisputable. To continue operating our businesses with a purely competitive mindset is folly. We can accomplish so much more, and get far more meaning from what we do, when we invest ourselves in the shared interest of getting out there and working together.

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