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Six Months to Win

by Olivia Hall



Copper Horse Coffee is one of New York State's youngest roasteries, but its youthfulness didn't stop it from taking this year's America's Best Espresso crown. In part, that's because the young roastery has a heavy hitter for a head roaster. We spoke to Jesse Harriott, roaster and co-owner of Copper Horse Coffee, about his win last month at Coffee Fest in Atlanta and what he hopes it will do for the young, small-batch roastery based in Ithaca.

Congratulations on your win. Tell us about the espresso you served.

The Enrique Torres Colombia is from a four-hectare farm in the Tolima region, a part of Colombia has been hard to get to in the past because of guerilla activity. It's a high-altitude, fully washed coffee that has a good inherent sweetness and complexity. And because Enrique's picking ripe cherries, pulping them, fermenting them for 20 hours, mechanically drying them afterwards—because of his attention to detail—I feel like we received a really superb coffee. We sourced it with the help of our friends at Café Imports.

How did you prepare for the competition?

I was working with John Letoto in Houston. Having a really talented barista who's also a roaster is very helpful; we both speak the same language. I had to round out some edges of the coffee and create the body and mouth feel, so we spent a few weeks really making sure we dialed it in. I'd roast a batch of coffee here, mail it to Houston, he'd pull shots of it and give me feedback, I'd readjust my roast. . . . By the time we did the competition, it was a nice heavy, syrupy espresso shot that still had a lot of complexity. So, really, I'd say winning the Best Espresso Competition, you have to be good at what you do, but the key for us was that we prepared and practiced for it.

You and your business partners (Kristian Woodall and Caleb Scott) started Copper Horse Coffee less than half a year ago with the help of a Kickstarter campaign. What does a win like this mean for your young business?

When we won, I was just in shock and didn't know how to respond except giving John a big hug. I came home the next week, and it didn't really change my day-to-day; I was more concerned about catching up. But it gave us some momentum. I've even shipped some coffee to a guy in Sweden. It's something we can put on a bag and let people know we put the time in to win this award. It's also really significant for me that the win is something we can celebrate with the people that have backed our Kickstarter campaign, who believed in us from the beginning.

In the end, for me it's not about beating the other guy. It's about the fact that we worked at it and we're sharpening our skills as we're growing and learning. Barista competitions, latte art competitions, roasting competitions, or any other—they're not what you're doing every day, they're their own paradigms, but they make you better and inform what you do.

How are you planning to build on this success? Where do you hope to take the business?

We're not looking to get tremendously huge. We've got an online business, retail business, and wholesale business and are looking to get to a sustainable level to serve markets that want small-batch coffee, folks who want custom-tailored blends and specific estate coffees. That's my whole goal, to be agile and fill niches. I feel like bigger companies are like a cruise ship you've got to turn, and that takes a lot of time. But we're this zippy speedboat. That's how I envision our little roastery.

—Olivia M. Hall is a writer based in Upstate New York.