

2023
ROASTER
of the YEAR
 MACRO CATEGORY

CAFE KREYOL
Manassas, Virginia



By Emily Puro

FOR JOSEPH STAZZONE, PRESIDENT and owner of Cafe Kreyol—Roast’s 2023 Macro Roaster of the Year—the winding road to coffee was one of deep personal reflection, an almost epic quest for purpose and redemption.

“Prior to coffee, I was pretty heavily involved in illegal drug trade and smuggling,” Stazzone says. “It’s not a beautiful story, but that’s just who I was at the time.” That path led Stazzone to prison, which ultimately led him to re-examine his life choices. “I decided I wanted to do something different,” he says. “I wanted to be an honest person.”

In 2010, while Stazzone was in prison, he saw the news about a devastating earthquake in Haiti. After he was released, the church he attended organized a relief trip to Haiti, so he signed up to participate. “It was a pretty standard week-long trip,” he says. “I didn’t feel very satisfied by it. We painted walls for a week. Everyone spent \$1,000 to go down there, and it was a 15-person team, so that’s \$15,000 that we spent to paint walls, and at the end we gave out old shoes.”

Not only did the work seem relatively trivial, he says, but when he met a local woman who had taken out a loan to purchase shoes to sell in her community, only to have the church group come in and give away shoes for free, he realized that group and others like it were doing more harm than good. Determined to make a real difference, and to never do anything that would take income away from locals, he flew back to Haiti a week later and started researching more effective and sustainable ways to help. The solution he landed on? Coffee.

“I had zero background in coffee,” Stazzone says. “It could have been organic avocados for all I

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The Cafe Kreyol team outside their Manassas, Virginia, roastery. (Back row, from left: Eric Girard, director of operations; David Cho, roaster in training; Jonathan Rosado, green buyer and director of quality control. Front row, from left: Brian Majewski, head roaster; Sheryn Reid, graphic designer and head of marketing; Joseph Stazzone, president and owner; Sami Rosado, marketing assistant; and Siberian husky Brady, head of security and chief aroma inspector.) *Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol*



Joseph Stazzone, president and owner of Cafe Kreyol.

THE WINNER’S STATS

ROASTING OUTPUT 276,000 pounds (plus about 630,000 pounds of green coffee; projected for 2022)

ESTABLISHED 2012

LOCATION Manassas, Virginia

EMPLOYEES Six (including the owners)

LEADERSHIP Joseph Stazzone, president and owner; Sharon Gottlieb, owner and board member; Tony Syme, owner and board member; Jonathan Rosado, director of quality control and green buyer; Eric Girard, director of operations

RETAIL LOCATIONS Zero

WEBSITE cafekreyol.com

cared. I just wanted the people there to have jobs.” (Though now, of course, he’s happy it turned out the way it did.) He learned that Haiti has a long history of coffee production and has at times been a top supplier of the world’s coffee consumption, with significant fluctuations in production since the crop was introduced in the early 1700s. With that in mind, he ventured into the mountains with a translator, began learning Haitian Creole, and started meeting coffee farmers.

When he returned to the United States, he turned his attention toward importing and marketing. “I knew how to smuggle,” he jokes, “but not import,



Stazzone sample roasting coffee in the Ramirez Estate quality control lab, Dominican Republic. Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol

which requires more paperwork.” The marketing would prove far easier. Stazzone was working at a Whole Foods Market at the time, and as supervisor of the meat department, he had a key to the store. He began sneaking in after hours to roast the Haitian coffee on the store’s automatic roaster. One night, his manager found him roasting in the store, and while he lost his job at the market, the manager set up a meeting for him with regional buyers, and they ended up placing orders for his coffee.

“I didn’t even have coffee here yet, or packaging, and we had Whole Foods stores picking us up,” he recalls, “so my business just kind of started.”

That was early 2012. Since then, Stazzone—now a licensed Q Grader and Coffee Quality Institute lecturer—has learned a lot about roasting, cupping, importing, post-harvest processing and more. He and his team at Cafe Kreyol roast more than 275,000 pounds per year, work closely with farmers in more than seven coffee-producing countries, and sell about 630,000 pounds of direct-trade green coffees annually to roasters and importers throughout the world.

MOVING BEYOND HAITI

Focusing on his commitment never to take jobs from local communities, Stazzone began in Haiti by setting up tree nurseries to establish a sustainable business

model for the producers there. His company provided funding for the nurseries, but contracted with Haitians to run them. The nurseries sell disease-resistant coffee varieties to local producers, and if the producers don’t have money to purchase trees, they can pay out of their first harvest. “It’s like a microloan for them to start the business,” Stazzone explains, “and then the money goes back into the tree nursery so it’s constantly growing.” He also began working with farmers to improve the quality of their coffees to gain access to the specialty market.

A few years later, after operations were established in Haiti, the company started thinking about expanding to other origins. “We wanted to see where else we could work, who we could help, and who could help us,” says Eric Girard, Cafe Kreyol’s director of operations. The company didn’t have to look far for its next origin, moving into the Dominican Republic to work with third-generation coffee farmer Eddy Ramirez. After taking over his family’s well-regarded coffee business, Ramirez wanted to focus more on specialty. “He wanted to bring the Dominican coffee line to the rest of the world in a way that it hadn’t been up until that point,” says Girard. “We found that really exciting, and we saw that as a good opportunity to work with him and his family and the great employees he has there who are very interested in developing special coffee fermentations and processing techniques to bring out really unique flavors.”

Together, the Ramirez Estate and Cafe Kreyol have developed red honey processed coffees, natural coffees and, most recently, an aged natural. “All of these things have taken numerous years,” Girard adds. “We started with them in 2014, and it wasn’t until just three or four years ago that we actually had a few viable special-process coffees.” The development work involved frequent trips to the Ramirez Estate, setting up different processing variations to test—different resting times, turning frequency, oxygen flow, pH levels, etc.—and cupping the results both at origin and in Virginia.

The results have been remarkable, with one Ramirez Estate red honey coffee receiving a score of 92 from *Coffee Review*, earning it a spot on the review

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LEFT
Stazzone among the coffee cherries. Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol



MIDDLE
Head roaster Brian Majewski at work. Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol



RIGHT
Eric Girard, director of operations, cupping coffee. Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol

site's "Top 30 Coffees of 2020" and tying the highest score *Coffee Review* has ever given a coffee from that origin. "The first lady of the Dominican Republic heard about it and visited their estate," says Girard. "It was a really good thing for them and us." (Two Cafe Kreyol Haitian coffees have also received scores of 92 from *Coffee Review*, the site's highest score ever for a single-origin from Haiti; one was named among the "Top 30 Coffees of 2021"; the other was reviewed in 2022.)

USING COFFEE AS A CATALYST

Collaborative working relationships and a focus on innovative processing techniques are central to the Cafe Kreyol model. Also central is a focus on working with partners whose impact goes beyond coffee.

In El Salvador, for example, Cafe Kreyol works with Maria Pacas, whose great-grandfather was the first to cultivate the Pacas variety of arabica (hence the name). "They do a ton of work in their community to try to elevate people out of poverty," says Stazzone of Pacas and her company, Café Pacas. "They provide opportunity and workshops. It's the type of socially responsible company that we get really excited about working with."

In Honduras, Cafe Kreyol partners with 18 Rabbit,

run by producers Marlén Contreras and her children, Flhor Zelaya Contreras and Napoleón "Napo" Zelaya. Flhor began farming at age 12, when her mother gave her a small plot of land on the farm, and the family was among the first in the area to grow organic coffee. For several years, Cafe Kreyol has been working with Flhor and Napo to develop and test different fermentation processes, but it's not just about the coffee. "This family sets up entrepreneurship classes for Indigenous women in their area," Stazzone says. "They do a ton for their community, and they're super environmentally friendly. Projects like that can be super exciting because together we're kind of pushing people who are growing coffee into the specialty coffee world and empowering them to continue to better their community and to grow their business, which elevates everyone around them."

In Bolivia, the company has partnered with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) on an agroforestry project with Indigenous coffee growers in the Apolo area who had never before exported coffee. The model involves clearing some trees at lower elevations but leaving the canopy higher up, which allows the coffee to grow while maintaining the nutrients in the soil and the biodiversity of the land. Before WCS and Cafe Kreyol began working there, the people had begun growing coca and working in gold mines, both of which require



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heavy deforestation. By focusing the project's coffee production on specialty rather than commercial, Cafe Kreyol has ensured that the efforts are sustainable not only environmentally but economically as well.

"We had a woman stand up at the last meeting we ran there and she said, 'You're not only preserving our environment here, and we're making more money than we ever did off of coca and any type of gold mining, but you're preserving our families, because our husbands aren't moving away to work in the mines. You're preserving our Quechua culture, because we're all staying here together in our communities, speaking our language.' That was very special to hear, because it's been years of working with them," says Stazzone. "When things like that happen and we see how great an impact it can make in these communities to just do the right thing through business, it's one of the most rewarding feelings about being in the industry."

Girard recalls one of the first times he saw the impacts of Cafe Kreyol's work firsthand, at a farm in Dondon, Haiti. "When we first got there," he says, "they didn't have trash collection services. They didn't have lights at night. But thanks to the increased incomes from the coffee, they were able to fund improvements in their community." On a subsequent trip, the farm had trash collection services, electric lighting, and even paved roads. "Let me tell you," Girard adds, "those paved roads are a blessing. They had potholes that would swallow your car up before that."

Currently, the company partners with producers in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Bolivia, Colombia and Brazil, though they're adding more partners all the time. In September 2022, for example, Stazzone went to Congo for a new project led by the U.S. Department of State. On the small island of Idjwi, where a majority of the men died during the

civil war and many of the women lost limbs to land mines, Cafe Kreyol has been asked to help the women set up the infrastructure needed to grow, process and export coffee for international markets. "They've never exported before, so I'm sure it's going to be a lot of effort to get things centralized," says Stazzone, "but they seem really excited to start doing it, and projects like this get us really motivated."

And while Cafe Kreyol invests a huge amount of time, effort and money into projects that empower coffee producers, it doesn't center its marketing efforts on the farmers' struggles.

"We really want to highlight the effort and effectiveness of the people we're working with," says Girard. "We don't want people to buy the coffee because they feel bad about the farmers we work with. We want them to buy the coffee because it's good coffee,



because the farmers put effort into improving it every single year. We find that's way more sustainable."

Stazzone with Haitian producer Philemon.

Photo courtesy of

Cafe Kreyol

BEING A TRUE PARTNER

Cafe Kreyol is committed to working closely with its producing partners to help them achieve long-term economic sustainability, along with a shared focus on environmental stewardship. That means combining their knowledge and expertise to produce coffee that will generate the highest incomes.

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Bolivian producer Don Celzo Quispe (foreground) works with Stazzone (center) on his first natural process, which will help conserve water in the region. Staff members from the Wildlife Conservation Society are pictured behind. Photo courtesy of Wildlife Conservation Society

“These farmers know how to grow coffee,” says Stazzone. “They’re farmers. I’m not a farmer. But being a post-harvest process technician, I’m very into that side of the industry. I believe that’s where coffee changes the most, during processing and fermentation.”

At origin, that translates into post-harvest processing workshops and long-term experiments to achieve what international markets consider high-quality coffees. “We have to first go into cupping,” says Stazzone of the company’s work with new partners. “We have to go into what the market wants and why. Producers think it’s very strange that another country will pay more money because something has notes of lemon or strawberry as opposed to chocolate. That’s an interesting luxury for people to have, right? Only the most advanced coffee producers who have been doing it for longer really get that.”

Once the stage is set for why post-harvest processing and cupping are so important, and what the producers’ goals are for their coffees, the company moves into more advanced workshops on the chemistry of coffee processing, fermentation methods, quality control and more. Again, these efforts take a huge investment of time and money from Cafe Kreyol and its producing partners, but the results make it all worthwhile.

“A few years back in Bolivia, a couple of the producers didn’t pass our quality control,” says Jonathan Rosado, Cafe Kreyol’s green buyer and director of quality control. “The following year, Joey

(Stazzone) and I went there and spent a month working with those producers to find the issue and to help them understand why it may cause inconsistencies.” They used pH measuring tools to show the farmers what was happening in the fermentation tanks, and cupping to show them how those chemical changes affect flavor. Rosado says the younger farmers were especially interested in using these newer tools to improve their families’ coffees. “They took all of our notes,” he adds. “They improved, and we were able to buy their lots this year.”

LEARNING AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

A common thread that runs throughout Cafe Kreyol’s work is a focus on gaining and sharing knowledge. In addition to its work at origin developing innovative processing techniques with its producer partners, the company runs its own research studies and is deeply involved in educating specialty coffee professionals and consumers.

A recent study the company performed involved post-roast rest times for special-process coffees, which turned up surprising results about how different coffees improve over time. (Read more about the study in *Roast*’s September/October 2022 issue, or at cafekreyol.com/research/post-roast-rest-study.) Other Cafe Kreyol studies have focused on whether nitrogen flushing preserves coffee flavor (spoiler: for Cafe Kreyol, it didn’t!); and the number of green coffee defects actually detectable in the cup (results did not necessarily match Specialty Coffee Association [SCA] guidelines). “You can just hear nitrogen gas flushing preserves product, or you can test it,” says Stazzone. “We typically opt to test because we want to see if we’re doing the right thing.”

Stazzone and Girard also teach workshops at Coffee Fest and other industry events, as well as virtual cupping classes for home roasters. Stazzone has delivered in-depth lectures and workshops on post-harvest processing, the key components of fair trade and direct trade, and other topics. Girard typically teaches classes on cupping. “It really is the



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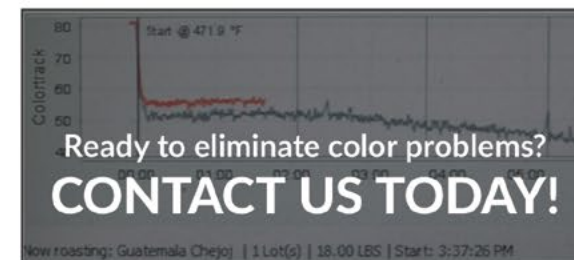
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From left: Napoleón "Napo" Zelaya and Flhor Zelaya Contreras of 18 Rabbit, with export manager Irma Acosta, at the company's washing station in Honduras. Photo courtesy of Cafe Kreyol

best tool for improving and sustaining the quality of your coffee," he says, "and it is absolutely essential for experimental and special fermentations like what we do. We would not be anywhere remotely as successful as we are if we didn't cup every single batch. That's really what I'm trying to bring to my classes, to educate everyone that they can cup, and they should cup, and they should encourage others to do the same. It really helps at every level."

"He doesn't just teach SCA cupping," says Stazzone of Girard's classes. "He teaches how you can apply it practically to the production you're doing." That might even include modifying the cupping form, he adds. Cafe Kreyol, for example, gives sweetness a score rather than simply using the SCA checkbox. "It's not a yes or no question whether coffee has sweetness or not," Stazzone says. "One of the things we instruct people is that they can feel comfortable to change those things to meet their own needs."

The Cafe Kreyol team is almost evangelical about cupping. "I'll shout it from the rooftops," says head roaster Brian Majewski. "Cupping is one of the most important things." He especially appreciates the company's laser focus on cupping objectively. "I'm a musician," he says, "and I can see similarities between coffee and art. People want it to be subjective, but there really are objective truths in all good art, what makes something good, so I appreciate that we are dedicated to cupping objectively. Being meticulous with all of that allows us to be very creative in exploring what we can do with manipulating the roast."

As an example, he points to an Ethiopian coffee

with a subtle berry acidity the team was eager to highlight. Experimentation on the roaster—and cupping every variation—were key. "I tried increasing the drum speed by 5 hertz, which does a lot," says Majewski, "increasing fan speed within the drum, charging the coffee at a lower temperature. All these things had us exploring and getting creative with the roaster, and it worked. Ultimately, we got a cup where the berry acidity was clear."

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

What began as a way to create sustainable jobs in Haiti following a devastating earthquake has flourished into a coffee company with significant global impact. From fostering economic and environmental sustainability for farmers who are working to empower their own communities, to performing rigorous scientific research to benefit the entire coffee supply chain, to developing new and innovative processing techniques in partnership with producers, Cafe Kreyol has become a catalyst for change in the specialty coffee industry.

"We're excited that we're part of a section of the industry that is going to these extremes and pushing on those boundaries and seeing what else can be done with coffee," says Rosado. "And it's not just us. It's the producers. It's anyone who's willing to give these sorts of experiments and fermentations a try."

"There's clearly so much that is yet to be discovered about specialty coffee and the processes farmers can do and the roasting techniques and all of this," agrees Majewski. "It's awesome to be part of a team that is at the forefront, really trying to push the boundaries."



EMILY PURO is a freelance writer and editor living in Portland, Oregon. In addition to Roast, her articles and essays have appeared in Writer's Digest, Better Homes and Gardens, Portland Monthly, The Oregonian and numerous other publications. She enjoys learning about the art and science of coffee, as well as the social and environmental impacts of the industry, and she continues to be amazed by those devoting their lives to this work.



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