

ABOUT THE FIRESTARTER



Who are you and what is your job title?

Georgio Testani, president and roaster with my wife, Lydia, at Georgio's Coffee Roasters, Long Island, N.Y.

How many years have you been roasting?

I have been in the coffee business for 26 years and roasting for 17 years.

What roasting equipment have you used?

Five Probats, two Diedrichs, two Victorias, one Ambex, one Garanti, two Topers, one custom-built roaster we used in Colombia, and one J. Deere we used in Colombia.

I am partial to my 37-year-old Probat. No automation and no water quenching.



GEORGIO TESTANI

— GEORGIO'S COFFEE ROASTERS —

"The two things I'm most passionate about: Jimi Hendrix and coffee."

GEORGIO TESTANI was pretty tired when I spoke to him late on a Thursday night. The night before he had been out late at a Jimi Hendrix film festival, then he had been out on deliveries the whole next day, and he was just finishing up roasting when he called. We had a lengthy conversation, and it was easy to forget that I was supposed to be doing an interview as we both went off on different coffee tangents. What our conversation really boiled down to was said most eloquently by Georgio: "Look Chris, people expect the best f-ing cup of coffee, and that's what I intend to give them."

Christopher Schooley: What are your earliest coffee-related memories?

Georgio Testani: My parents from Rome percolating in the morning and making stovetop espresso at night, every night. We were given hot milk with coffee at the age of 3.

CS: What led you to become a coffee roaster?

GT: The garbage being sold in New York as specialty coffee for many years.

CS: What's the coffee scene like on Long Island, and what has the reaction been to your zeal and the coffees that you're bringing in?

GT: The scene on Long Island is not so great. We are considered cutting-edge, and people do not realize the amount of sourcing, cupping and travel it takes. We are the only roaster that has offered seven Cup of Excellence (COE) coffees, Panama geisha, Ninety Plus as well as direct-trade



coffees. A lot of roasters sell conventional coffees as specialty coffee. We do not. We have been invited to five COE group cuppings in New York as well. Our goal is to pay farmers high prices for the best green beans, then roast and sell them.



The reaction is that all the coffees we source sell out. This takes experience, passion and risk. Our coffeehouse sells no food, and 90 percent of our sales are whole beans. We do not accept tips, but people can contribute money for the building of houses in Colombia for displaced farmers through a project called “Un Techo Para Colombia” (A Roof for Colombia). We will have enough for a second house next year, thanks to our customers. This is what it is really all about.

We are very selective with our wholesale and restaurant accounts. We are not for everyone. The bar needs to be kept high. This is the only way to survive: Hard work and delivering on the promise you make to your customers. Our coffeehouse has had a few guests from the New York Board of Trade; the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange; as well as the buyers and cuppers from the old Goldman Sachs trading days. We will cup with all who decide to visit. We also have cupping and coffee-tasting seminars. My mentor, Segundo Martin from Eldorado Coffee in New York, knows more about coffee and cupping than anyone I have ever met and was very generous with his knowledge and expertise when I was younger.

CS: What coffee-growing areas have you visited, and which would you most like to visit?

GT: We have traveled to Colombia (eight trips), Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and Mexico. And five trips to Puerto Rico to source one farm! Panama will be next. Ethiopia is the prize.

CS: You have some special connections with Colombia.

GT: My lovely wife, Lydia, is a coffee roaster from Colombia, and she cups better than anyone I have ever met. She is also a great roaster and keeps me on my toes. Her cousin owns one of the largest farms in Tolima; she also knows some wonderful people from the Colombian Federation, who are true experts. We were honored to be invited to two cuppings in Colombia, which we respectfully attended. To be at the table cupping with these experts was quite an experience. They cup up to 600 cups a

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day! Our lovely daughter, Carolina, is another roaster who works with a grant from the Netherlands in helping single mothers and children on farms. One trip a few years ago, we spent three weeks in the coffee regions of Colombia.

CS: You mentioned that you had about 36 coffee roasters. Can you tell me about your collection?

GT: [It is] endless: 36 at least, from 2-ounce to 15-kilo. I have two 5-pound coal-fired roasters from Italy that are almost 200 years old. We currently use a 37-year-old German Probat 15-kilo, which produces the finest coffee from all the roasters we have used. My first roaster was a very old American J. Deere 1-pound roaster that I used all day for a couple of years. It used electric heat, with a wind-up crank with 13 gears! There were no roasters around back then in the early '90s. I brought the next roaster back from Europe on a plane from Germany, just the shell. I fitted it with custom-made blower, gas and Venturi motor mounts from America. I later found out the shell was made by Garanti in Turkey.



CS: What is your favorite part of roasting, and what do you find the most challenging?

GT: My favorite part is the peace it forces upon you. The challenge is to tweak the roast to reach the ultimate cup.



CS: When I spoke to you earlier, you were out on deliveries, and you said that you'd be at the shop all night. Sounds like you're pretty busy. When do you actually roast?

GT: First, I try to get up in the morning! There is no set schedule. Three a.m., 10 p.m.—we roast as is required.

CS: What do you feel are the biggest issues that specialty coffee faces today?

GT: The indoctrination of the youth as well as adults into [accepting] conventional coffees being sold as specialty coffee is the biggest problem. Our college campuses are full of large corporate roasters, and not small, specialty roasters. It is up to the

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consumer to change this. Speed and greed is not the answer.

CS: What is your best fire story?

GT: I never really had a fire. I think preventing them is much easier than putting them out. One time I was hired to roast for another company in a retail location. Their new Probat was not set up very well, and near the end of a roast, in front of quite a few people, the belt and chain had fallen off, so I opened the door and spun the drum with my bare hand three times to get the coffee out of the drum. It worked. The problem was the burns on my hand—bandages for three months! I do not recommend this to anyone. The best thing to do is have a one-by-four on hand if you need to get the beans out quickly in a pinch.



CHRISTOPHER SCHOOLEY *drinks his coffee black. Chris and fire go way back. Tell him your fire stories, or suggest a future Firestarter, at ceschooley@yahoo.com.*

ROASTING TIPS FROM GEORGIO TESTANI

- 1 “Your roaster should eventually be an extension of yourself. Get to know as much as you can about the machine. Maintain and clean it as needed, and you will get a good feel if something is not right. The more you do it, the less stress, should something happen.”
- 2 “Learn your craft, and do not try to rush things. There are some very qualified and truly talented people in the coffee world, and they did not get there overnight. Be patient, focus and turn off the phone!”



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