

Interview with Douglas Weber



Douglas Weber in his studio

Hi Douglas, please briefly introduce yourself for those who don't know you yet and tell us what you do.

My name is Douglas Weber, originally from Los Angeles, CA, but now a resident of 13 years in Japan. I started my design and engineering career at Apple in 2002 as one of the original members of the iPod Product Design team that went on to create the iPhone. I moved to Japan in 2007 to start a Japan-based division of the Product Design team for Apple, bringing together local talent throughout Asia to help Apple stay ahead in the special materials and manufacturing fields as they related to product design. During this time, I developed a large network of specialty manufacturing suppliers, which I continued to leverage after leaving Apple

in 2014 to pursue my passion for coffee equipment.

When did your love for coffee bloom and what exactly led you to leave Apple for founding Weber Workshops?

Even in high school I loved frequenting cafés to do my homework, but the real love affair started right about the time I started working at Apple. It was still early in the third wave coffee scene, and there were a couple of cafés in San Francisco that we would frequent before heading into the office in the morning. This was my wake-up call to amazing espresso. In the ID studio at Apple there was a vintage Faema E61 machine that we would all play with to make cappuccinos before starting our design reviews. I also developed a habit around this time of buying commercial and prosumer machines, taking them apart to modify, and wondering why they were still designed and manufactured like it was 1950.

At this time, I vowed to eventually start making my own equipment and gave myself a 5-year maximum time limit at Apple. I didn't anticipate the level of success the products at Apple would have, nor could I have imagined the level of great projects and responsibility I would be given afterwards. The 5-year plan turned into almost 13 years in the end, but by that point Apple had grown to feel like a big company, and I had put my passion on hold long enough. In 2014 I decided it was the time to start a new chapter.

When looking at your products, it is easy to spot a design reminiscent of Cupertino's aesthetics; is it something that makes you proud or is it something you wouldn't want to be connected with anymore?

I lived and breathed the Apple design culture for all the formative years of my career. I am extremely proud to have been able to work with what was, in the consumer goods space, probably the most influential team of designers in the last century. Moving forward I want to continue to emulate all of that great influence together with my own views on coffee, machines, technology, and product longevity.

Why did you choose to move to Japan? What do you embrace of its culture and what, instead, you would change?

Before joining Apple, I took a year off Stanford to come to Japan on a scholarship and learn pottery the Japanese way. I actually already had an offer from Apple that I turned down to come and do this. At the end of the year, while still in love with ceramics, I received another offer from Apple. I decided that I could come back and do ceramics in the future, but an opportunity to work at a rebounding tech company with a cool CEO (Jobs hadn't been back so long then) was something I probably shouldn't pass up. I have no regrets there.

Japanese culture had also influenced me in many other ways since my childhood. I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles with a large Japanese and Taiwanese population. My best friend in elementary school was a

Japanese kid named Daisuke who was in the states for a few years with his father's work. His mother actually taught me to speak, read and write Japanese starting when I was about 10 years old; this gave me a big advantage later as I was able to pick up the language at a fluent level in a relatively short amount of time.

I have no aims at changing the culture of Japan. Rather I want to help make sure the great aspects of Japanese culture from the past, specifically craftsmanship, are preserved. As a sort of de-facto ambassador of the United States and Silicon Valley, I like to show people that there is another way of making a living where you don't have to commute into an office or work for a big company to be successful. I currently live in the Japanese countryside by the sea, have a wonderful design studio here, and am able to leave my house in the morning and be at the factories meeting with my employees in Taipei by noon. How cool is that?

Speaking about the coffee world, how has design evolved? Do you find macro differences between the past and the present?

It's a hot topic that I think lures many people to the bandwagon. I think that people are viewing design of coffee machines as more of a re-skinning of existing technology rather than a complete rethink of how the machines are made. I think that the strength of my company, myself included, is that we like to reinvent things from the ground up to make sure that we are taking advantage of all the material and manufacturing improvements of the past 50 years.

Deconstructing and reconstructing, and doing so in a way that won't become obsolete after 5 to 10 years, is how I like to focus. This is exactly why I'm drawn to things like vintage Porsches.

In your pictures, you are often seen using an Olympia Cremina, what exactly do you like of this machine? What features should your ideal lever machine have and have you ever



Douglas Weber pulling a shot with the Cremina

In your opinion, would lever machines need different grinders respect to pump ones? If so, why?

Inherently they should not. However, there is something of a mismatch in ethos when using a motor to do one task while not another. Pairing a manual grinder with a lever machine makes sense.

When you design something for the coffee environment, what is the deeper message you would always like to be

considered building one?

The simplicity of the machine and ability, with a little bit of skill, to make amazing coffee. While it's not the solution for a café, I can make a guest to the studio happier with that little machine than I can with one of the other big commercial pump machines sitting right next to it. But it's not perfect. I think that should answer the last question =)

present in all your creations?

Awareness and longevity. All of my products are designed to be used for years, decades, if not longer. I want them to be the last grinder or widget you ever need to elevate the art of coffee. Similarly, I aim to invent and design products that help eek appreciation out of every single coffee seed that makes its way into your cup. It may be a simple 5-minute break, but I want that to be the most rewarding damn 5 minutes you ever take. Inherent pleasure

in interacting with the tools, no wasted materials, and the best quality cup you've ever had.

Which materials do you think should be used more in the world of coffee machines and grinders, in substitution to which ones and why?

It's a very general question, but I'll answer it the best I can. In general, I like to keep my materials palette fairly simple. Stainless, Aluminum, Glass, Wood, and engineered plastics only where they add value and can help improve the longevity of the main 3. I try not to coat or hide anything, and I think that mechanisms should be beautiful and accessible as opposed to hidden under a hood. The thing that bothers me the most is treating a machine like a computer where there is a cosmetic case that you open up only to expose a rat's nest of tubes, wires, and general mayhem.

Associated to your workshop you also have the Kamakiri café, does it play an important role in the creation of your products or is it just a side business?

It serves as a testing board for new products, and also a place for visitors to see our equipment in action. We make products that are intended for either the discerning home barista or the busy café, so it helps to prove that they can easily handle the load of a busy shop. The reality is that we sell worldwide online, so the percentage of people that can actually come to Fukuoka to see the products in person it is very slim.

Your company is specialised in coffee

related products but you also manufactured a pepper mill, why?

Because I never owned one that I liked, and the key to making a great coffee mill also happened to be applicable to pepper. So I miniaturized the design and made it specifically for pepper. Now it's used by several Michelin-starred chefs and backyard BBQ ninjas worldwide, so I'm pretty sure it was a good decision.

If you had the opportunity to send a message to the coffee world today, what would it be?

Coffee is a gift we should cherish, and the value goes way beyond the price of the materials or even the carbon footprint of getting it to your cup. We can't buy time, but we can use better tools to ensure that every 5-minute coffee break is a highlight of our day.

Best wishes, Douglas

The *Lever*

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