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## About Us



Since their earliest beginnings, American farms have been the birthplace of thousands of inventions --from harvesting machines to the electric fence. The legendary "Yankee mechanic" was a rural jack(or jenny)-of-all-trades, whose tinkering brought about many of the changes that made farm life more pleasant and productive. Syd and Jerry's Coffee Roaster is part of that tradition.

It was developed in the shop of a small farm on Samish Island, Washington – a narrow peninsula that juts into the cold waters of Puget Sound. Neighbors passing by on their Sunday stroll got used to smelling roasting coffee as they walked past the chickens, sheep and fruit trees.

The idea got started with a snowstorm. In the winter of 1996 a freak storm dumped three feet of snow on Samish Island in a single day. Besides crushing some older barns, the snowfall made it impossible to get in to town, and as luck would have it, the Stapletons ran out of coffee. You may know how seriously Northwesterners take their coffee. This was a real crisis.

Just a few months before, the Stapletons had returned from a year long sailing trip into the Caribbean, and Syd Stapleton remembered the pound of green coffee beans they had bought out of curiosity in a little country store on the coast of Mexico. He found the green beans, and roasted them in a frying pan on their kitchen stove. It made a smoky mess, but when he and Anne tried the coffee, they were astonished to discover that it tasted much better than the \$10 or \$12 a pound "gourmet" whole bean coffee that they normally bought.

This experience, once the snow had melted, led to some further study. It turned out, Syd read, that farmers had always roasted their own coffee – up through the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Until that time, the state of transportation and packaging made it impossible for people to get their roasted coffee from central roasting factories. Then, about the same time that beer, bread and cheese were turned into industrial products, massive advertising campaigns convinced Americans that it was more "modern" to drink stale coffee from cans than to roast it at home.

This is where Jerry Whitfield comes in. The Whitfields are neighbors of the Stapletons, and after the Stapletons got back from their year long boat trip, the Whitfields became partners in the 65-year-old wooden schooner that had made the trip.

Jerry Whitfield had invented the pellet stove – a revolutionary home heating device that cleanly burns compressed sawdust – some years before. He had successfully built up a company to manufacture the stoves, and holds a doctorate in combustion engineering. Syd's background included many years as a contract



*Jerry Whitfield*

mechanical designer for tool and die shops (and previous experience as a tool and die maker himself).

In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that once Syd and Jerry got talking about roasting coffee, some experimentation would begin. Why, they asked, shouldn't everyone have access to freshly roasted coffee? They found a source for more green coffee, and began to learn about roasting, starting out with a "heat gun" that had last been used to strip old varnish off the boat.

The next steps led to buying a used milling machine and borrowing a lathe that had been in a boat building shop in nearby Anacortes. Over the next two years, they could be found in the shop, nights and weekends, and any other time that could be found. The prototypes steadily became more refined, and Syd and Jerry began some serious investigation of the current state of the coffee industry.

Talking to restaurant operators about roasting their own coffee, the most common objection Syd and Jerry heard, in spite of the potential advantages in quality and cost, was that life is just too complex to take on learning and teaching yet another skill. The owner of a popular and highly regarded Italian restaurant in Seattle said, "I can barely teach people to make a good espresso! Now you want me to have them roast the coffee too?!?"



*Syd Stapleton*

So it became clear that in addition to doing a good job of roasting coffee, the machine would have to be fully automatic, using the latest in electronic controls to manage the roasting process. The goal was to make roasting coffee as simple as toasting bread.

It took time. A path outside Syd's house is paved with rejected coffee beans. But, by refusing to settle for merely adequate, Syd and Jerry have succeeded in producing a roaster that produces excellent roasted coffee, time after time, without the need for a skilled professional roaster.

People did it years ago. Now it can be done again, but more easily and efficiently, thanks to some work on the farm.