



## Jack's BLEND

Jack Groot owns JP's Coffee & Espresso Bar, On Track Coffee Consulting and the Midwest Barista School based out of Holland, Mich. E-mail your questions to [jack@ontrackcoffeeconsulting.com](mailto:jack@ontrackcoffeeconsulting.com) with "Jack's Blend" as the subject line.

Greetings Jack:

I want to provide a brief background for context before I pose my question. I've been in the coffee industry for three years. I began as a roaster/wholesaler here in Memphis, Tenn. I started as the DSD guy and moved up to roaster 2.5 years ago. We are a specialty roaster, using only specialty grade coffee, with no retail outlets but supplying quite a few along with grocery store business and school and church fundraisers. Our volume has steadily increased; in 2008 we did just over 250,000 pounds.

This spring we had to sell after the loss of grocery store accounts and other business lines. The business was bought by an office coffee company (Ouch!). Due to a drastic difference in philosophy regarding both bean quality and roasting practices, I may be without a job rather soon. No sour grapes here, just wanted to put things in context.

Here is my question, how are roasters (roasting personnel) viewed in the industry? I realize that some are roast-masters, some are doing double duty as green buyers, cuppers or quality control, but I have often struggled back and forth with whether the roaster should be viewed simply as a production guy who just operates a machine, or as an artisan professional who plies his or her trade as a craftsman.

Personally I've been involved in tons of cupping and quality control activities and I have been to pretty much every training class in roasting and quality control offered by the SCAA. I have also done Golden Cup certification. I'm curious to know how you think we — trained roasters — are perceived in the industry and what questions to ask for the process of evaluation both internally in a company and externally for purposes like job searching. — *John P., Roaster*

Hi John,

You ask something that relates directly to multiple conversations I've had about roasting over the last couple of years. How does new technology affect the old way of roasting? Some say, "Roasting is an art!" Others say, "No, roasting is a science!" And so on. ...

*"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."*

— *Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943.*

Don't you just love that quote. It sums up man's blindness to new ways of doing things. It shows the hubris of people who worked on something their whole lives. It shows how one so close to the trees cannot see the forest. People get entrenched.

They make their money from a certain product, a certain way of doing things. To open the mind or accept a new way means admitting one was wrong.

But, what does *not* accepting new methods, new inventions and a change of business model mean? You could ask the owners of businesses that failed because they didn't accept new technology over the last decades of technology explosion. If you can track them down, try to find company leaders who said, "That will never ...," or "The only way ...," or made other blind statements.

How does that relate to roasting? Back in the day — before computers, Agtrons and other wonderful tools that assist roasters — roasting was purely an art. Roasters loaded green coffee in a machine and with training, skill and their six senses roasted coffee to perfection. There was no other way.

Today's newly invented tools constantly challenge long-held beliefs. They eliminate the need for some skills and replace others with exact and consistent technology. Not all good or bad, but a reality nonetheless.

As to the coffee industry, I ask myself the following questions when weighing technology as a replacement for traditional methods:

1. Does the technology equal or improve product quality?
2. Does the technology equal or improve product consistency?
3. Do I believe strongly enough in or have a valid enough argument for the current way of doing things to allow me to ignore these advancements?
4. Does the technology have a substantial ROI, enough to justify a switch?
5. Do I want to go the direction that this advance in technology is leading?

You, as a trained roaster, will be viewed differently by potential employers depending on your answers to the above. I personally believe the art of roasting can at minimum be assisted by and improved by technology. Who knows, technology may one day replace the roast-master (no hate mail, please). Any "artist" who thinks that his skills are so refined that a computer or laser or Agtron can't replace him/her is bound for the unemployment line.

If you view roasting as an art, find companies in line with that thinking and apply for a job. If you view it as a science, go back (to previous roaster) and apply.

Hope that helps.