

# barista

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M A G A Z I N E

ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

## TEN INCREDIBLE women in coffee

SERVING THE PROFESSIONAL BARISTA COMMUNITY



# In 1970

Erna Knutsen took a secretarial job at a coffee and spice company in San Francisco. Her duties included taking dictation and keeping up the "position book," primarily, but she was also called upon to supervise random lots of coffee and try to sell them to "the small trade," as it was called.

Through this assignment, Erna became the first woman, the first person, in fact, to champion the cause of single origin coffees. She challenged the institution of male-dominated cupping rooms by not only demanding a seat at the table herself, but demonstrating that her palate and ability were far superior to any of theirs. Before she established Knutsen Coffees, Ltd., in 1985, she had coined the term specialty coffee, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Not 30 years after Erna's courageous, tenacious efforts secured respect for women in coffee, women are involved in every aspect of what

is now known, thanks to Erna, as the specialty coffee industry. But it's important to remember that even now in the 21st century, and in a trade as broadminded as specialty coffee, it's taken longer than it should have for women in coffee to obtain positions of strength and authority. It's happening, however, and today, female coffee professionals are unstoppable.

In determining the 10 women to celebrate within our pages, we reviewed the backgrounds and accomplishments of more than 100 distinguished women in this industry. It was nearly impossible to narrow it down.

We are delighted to present to you 10 women we think are incredible, who we know to be leaders in their field, and who are forging ahead within the specialty coffee industry for the sake of what they find most important: quality, sustainable coffee.

—Sarah Allen



**the champion**  
HEATHER PERRY



**the sumner**  
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**the advocate**  
CLAUDIA CASTELLON



**the roaster**  
MARY TELLIE



**the producer**  
MARYSABEL CABALLERO GARCÍA



**the director**  
MICHELLE CAMPBELL



**the trainer**  
HEATHER RINGWOOD



**the café owner**  
PHUONG TRAN



**the sales person**  
CHRISTY RODRIGUEZ



**the green coffee buyer**  
ADDY HEDINSDOTTIR



## *the roaster*

**MARY TELLIE**

Artisan Roaster, Electric City  
Roasting Company  
Scranton, Pennsylvania

Photo by Lettieri Photo

### ***You were a banker for years during which you roasted coffee at home as a hobby. Where did the interest come from originally?***

I always enjoyed coffee. During my banking career, I had an opportunity to travel locally and abroad and looked forward to trying different coffees in different towns. I purposely looked for regional differences, i.e. strong coffee like Café Cubano when I lived in Miami or deep rich coffee when in San Francisco. I think I became interested in coffee because I could not get good coffee locally, in my community at the time. I was always looking for a great cup of coffee.

### ***How did you teach yourself to roast?***

I remember visiting a café in San Francisco and watching them roast coffee and I thought, how cool. So I went to the library and took out a book on coffee, as they did not have a book on coffee roasting. I read that, and then I found a book on home roasting and read that cover to cover, and then met John Gant from Gimme! Coffee and asked him to teach me about coffee roasting. At the time I was just interested in learning how to roast. Then I started using a heat gun with a fabricated steel extension to use to learn, in my garage. So it really was a bunch of different methods and techniques. I remember the first time I roasted espresso—my husband

was worried that I might burn down the house. It was at that time when he strongly urged me to open a café and not roast in the house anymore.

### ***What did you feel was missing from the coffee being offered around you?***

At the time, I was not sure what was missing except that I could not get a fresh cup of coffee and certainly not freshly roasted coffee. No one then talked about a local roaster. I remember going to a local café that used (regular) coffee as espresso.

### ***The work you do—being a business owner and a coffee roaster—are both traditionally male dominated fields. Have you come up against any challenges in these areas as a woman?***

I worked in a male dominated field during my banking tenure, so I guess I figured out a long time ago that working both hard and smart was a successful combination in any industry. I do feel that the passion in the coffee industry at this level is intense and really refreshing. Being 100 percent Italian and female can create a lot of, well, passion at times, and while (that quality is) sometimes not “appropriate” in banking, it is welcomed in the coffee business. It think it’s a perfection thing. As far as respect, I think it’s in the bean and the industry and the coffee. I clearly get that I am the steward of some amazing coffee that comes our way and I need to respect it and the amazing folks that trust us to roast it to profile.

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**Why do you or don't you feel this is a particularly exciting time for women in the coffee industry?**

I think the tide is changing in specialty coffee. In my opinion anyone who is willing to work hard and understand the human side of the coffee and the uniqueness of the coffees we have access to should be excited. Women should be very excited to be aligned with an industry that in my opinion, is based upon a meritocracy... if you roast a great coffee I don't think too many people care if you're a woman or a man.

**What does the future hold for you and Electric City (ECR)?**

I never really know how to answer this question. I created ECR to provide anyone the opportunity to access great coffees and knowledge about those coffees. We work really hard at providing traceability and direct access to many of our coffees. We have been growing above the Specialty Coffee Association of America statistics by about 25 percent year over year. I know we have a lot of work to do to maintain our growth model but we are also committed to making sure to meet with the men and women behind the beans: the farmers, millers, exporters, and importers. Trying to implement the direct trade approach is very time consuming but is amazing for both a retail and wholesale business. What you can learn from the family who has worked a particular farm for three generations is humbling. ☺



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