

Part
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COFFEE ACTIVISM

Standing Up for a
Better Industry Future

By Anastasia Prikhodko



QUEER COFFEE EVENTS founders
Ellan Kline (left) and RJ Joseph.

It is no new fact that sexual harassment and discrimination exist across all industry sectors. It is also no new fact that the perpetrators leading the pact of exclusivity tend to get away retribution-free, as a result of ingrained ideas and traditional justice systems—or lack of.

The specialty coffee industry is no exception. But what does make the industry different are the people behind the machines who are challenging the status quo to ensure individuals feel safe and heard.

A Rising Movement

A number of coffee organizations were started as a direct response to exclusion, harassment, and lack of accessibility to resources. These projects and events not only help raise awareness of the issues, but also bring up solutions and highlight biases.

“Queer Coffee Events, #coffeetoo, Cherry Roast, WINCC, Boston Intersectional Coffee Collective, and Coffee Friends in Philadelphia all come to mind as great examples of activist organizations,” says Sadie Renee, Pacific Northwest Market Development Manager for Oatly.

The current system habitually favors a certain group of individuals, Renee explains, and for that to change, action needs to be drastic and loud.

“Hiring for diversity has become a much-discussed topic in the industry, but I commonly hear, ‘We don’t receive diverse applicants,’” she says. “As pointed out at The Chocolate Barista’s Black Coffee Event in Portland in April [2018], the responsibility falls to leadership to ensure the work environment, company culture, and recruiting processes are such that welcome a diverse staff.”

Renee adds that change is happening in coffee because of the people-focused nature of the industry. Coffee is a unique commodity and it goes through many hands until it finally reaches the end point—the consumer. Renee says that the experience of ordering a latte brings customers face to face with someone who likely cares a lot about

the coffee they’re serving and the process it went through.

Coffee also maintains a unique community with events like latte art throwdowns, competitor support and collaboration, and local events and organizations taking place.

“This unique proximity to other community members brings issues of inequity to light more frequently, and brings the opportunity to take positive action closer,” she says.

“

The rise of locally focused organizations aimed at elevating and supporting community members who may be disenfranchised is a sign that the industry is beginning to acknowledge these problems and take action.

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The industry’s response has been incredibly overdue. People in coffee have had to deal with years of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and systematic inequalities that have supported male-forward and white-forward constructs throughout the industry.

“While this certainly isn’t relegated to the specialty coffee industry, the rise of the #metoo movement and tangential cultural discussions have certainly helped fuel this fire,” says Renee. “The national conversation that followed the SCA’s 2017 decision to host multiple World Coffee Competition events in Dubai also helped shape this discussion. Coffee community ‘town halls’ were held across the country to discuss the risks this posed for the queer community.”

Such action prompted the SCA to relocate the competition.

The rise of locally focused organizations aimed at elevating and supporting community members who may be disenfranchised is a sign that the industry is beginning to acknowledge these problems and take action.

#CoffeeToo: Fighting Harassment & Discrimination

Molly Flynn, Seattle-based specialty coffee veteran and founder of #coffeetoo, decided to take action in October 2017, after witnessing “the usual amount of sexual harassment, discrimination, and unconscious bias” at a coffee event.

“It was just so commonplace and frustrating,” she says.

This incident prompted Flynn to share her experiences and frustrations with friends and colleagues, to which everyone could relate.

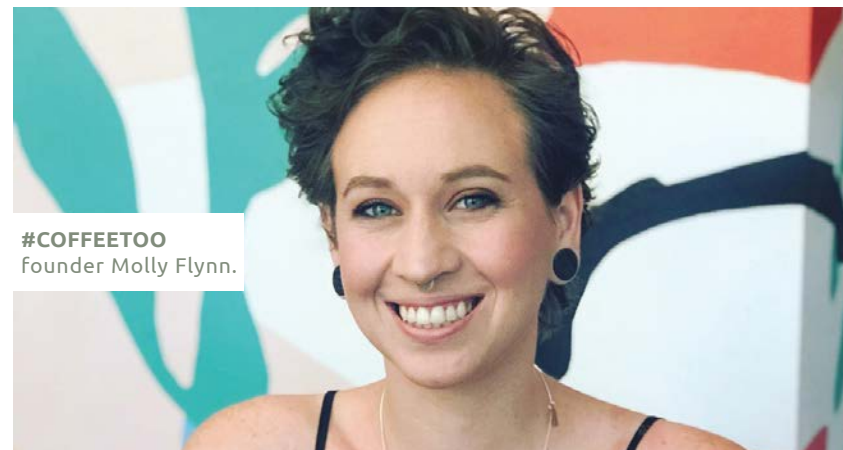
“We then decided something had to happen. So that night, I drank a whole lot of coffee and until the very early hours of the morning I drafted the skeleton of what was going to become #coffeetoo,” she says. “The next day when I woke up, a friend told me about the #metoo movement, which I had not heard of before. It was very validating to see this is not just my small group of friends or me. It is a huge global issue.”

The volunteer-run grassroots project provides information and resources to coffee professionals on the subjects of discrimination and sexual harassment. So far, #coffeetoo has hosted several free educational events and created “A Pocket Guide to Your Rights” geared towards the coffee industry in the U.S.

The pocket guide covers federal laws and asks three questions:

1. What are your rights?
2. What can be done if your rights have been violated?
3. How can we take care of ourselves if we have been through an unwanted or traumatic situation?

The guide, which also provides a list of resources ranging from legal to crisis hotlines, has been mailed throughout the U.S., including 100 copies to Hawaii.»



#COFFEETOO
Founder Molly Flynn.

and even to the U.K.. Flynn also wants to create a U.K. version of the pocket guide, and for the U.S. version to be translated into Spanish.

Since creating the original framework for #coffeetoo, Flynn says the movement has continued to “equally fight harassment and discrimination.”

“That discriminatory piece is essential because of calling ourselves ‘#coffeetoo,’ people have really focused on the sexual harassment aspect,” she says. “I really do strive to find ways to establish how committed we are to fighting discrimination and making sure that our industry is equitable, equal, balanced, and that there is diversity, inclusion, and equal representation.”

Flynn also says it is extremely important to credit Tarana Burke for starting the #metoo movement back in 2006. She says Burke brought “awareness to the sexual abuse womxn of color endure and it is because of her the movement happening today exists.”



Queer Coffee Events: Advocating for the Industry’s Marginalized

Queer Coffee Events (QC) was born after a series of actions within the Specialty Coffee Association left many in the queer coffee community feeling like the industry wasn’t doing the necessary work to include them. As a result, RJ Joseph, roaster at Counter Culture Coffee and writer (including for *Fresh Cup Magazine*), together with her partner Ellan Kline, launched QC in November 2017.

Joseph says that while “many were pushing for change within the mainstream coffee events,” she and Kline felt they could support the community in their own way through “events that not only accommodate but actively center queer folks, especially those who are also marginalized in other ways,” she says. “To thrive as non-marginalized folks in the industry, we believe coffee profes-



QUEER COFFEE EVENTS
roundtable discussion.

sionals who experience marginalization need spaces where we don’t have to think twice about whether or not we’ll feel at home.”

The aim of QC is to provide a space for attendees to feel safe and respected, and for new voices to be heard. Joseph says this is also one of the challenges.

“When you create this type of space, you’re responsible for the experience people have,” she says. “The hard part of that is, if someone feels uncomfortable at an event, organizers have to handle that.”

Therefore, a strong code of conduct gets posted in advance of every event and is also read at the beginning.

Looking back at her time in the industry, one significant change is that of coffee professionals starting organizations to center marginalized professionals. This move has pushed event focus to be much deeper than it used to be, she explains.

“I consistently [now] see thoughtful, communal events like panel discussions, fundraisers, educational series, and »



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Coffee Activism, Part One

the development of new competitions outside of SCA coffee championships," she says. "People all over the country are taking on the work in their own way, and it has been really inspiring to watch and be a tiny part of."

Although there is much to be excited about, Joseph adds that as long as structural inequality exists in the world, it will continue to exist in the coffee industry.

"It's important to do what we can, but it's not a problem that comes with a perfect solution," she says. "All we can do as individuals and teams is keep learning and making sure we're taking concrete steps to interrogate our own implicit bias and change the smaller systems we have control over."

She also makes a point about "exceptionalism," the idea that because a woman has won the recent World Barista Championships or that a black person finally made it onto the Barista Guild Executive Council means that "now we as an industry have reduced structural inequality."

“More people are seeing that coffee and hospitality jobs can and should be positive, sustainable, fulfilling careers. We as a society need people to do these jobs and do them well, so we're pushing for the jobs to meet that standard.”

"The point of structural inequality is one person achieving a goal within the current system is not the same thing as systemic change," she says. "We'd need actual data to see whether we have overall reduced wage inequality, increased the number of management positions held by people of all demographics, and reduced instances of discrimination—we don't currently have that."

Evidently, the groundwork is being laid and change is in motion. And looking across the food and beverage world, it would seem that the specialty coffee industry has been one of the more outspoken sectors pushing for change.

"I think it's because many in the hospitality industry don't have a whole lot to lose, but do have a whole lot to gain by speaking up," says Joseph. "The vast majority of coffee and hospitality jobs are physically, intellectually and emotionally demanding. Yet most employees in those sectors are making far less than a living wage."

"On top of that, people from all backgrounds and demographics, but especially those who are marginal-

ized, deal with unfair labor practices, harassment, discrimination, and lack of job security," she goes on to say. "More people are seeing that coffee and hospitality jobs can and should be positive, sustainable, fulfilling careers. We as a society need people to do these jobs and do them well, so we're pushing for the jobs to meet that standard."

Portland Coffee Social Club: Encouraging Unity

Another group aiming to provide a fun, inclusive, and safe space is Portland Coffee Social Club (PCSC), led by Thor Himle, of Portland Roasting Coffee, and Elizabeth Chai, of La Marzocco USA, with the recent addition of Holly Geber, SCA event marketing coordinator, to the organizing team.

Himle and Chai formed the organization to "inspire, encourage unity and professional growth" for people in coffee. PCSC also organizes competitions, »




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panels, and events focused on education and diversity. Recently, they've partnered with Pacific Foods to support their 2019 season, which will include providing scholarships, prizes, and more speaking events throughout the year.

"When we see forward movement in the industry, we become more encouraged and aware of how we ourselves can do work to improve our own communities—which improves the industry as a whole," the founders say.

Himle and Chai highlight some of the positive outcomes they've experienced from running PCSC, such as "helping out the community grapple with the Deferred Candidacy Policy and the Dubai decision by the SCA, as well as having the opportunity to host the Brewers Cup Preliminary and give competitors the stage they deserve."

They explain that being "big Brewers Cup fans," they feel the competition doesn't get enough credit.

"Both of us have been eager to remove focus from coffee events that revolve around typical 'bro culture' such as keggers or parties that imply the attendees must get hammered to be accepted or fit in," they say.



A CHERRY ROAST competition.

Cherry Roast: Strength in Numbers

Cherry Roast is an organization that has been highly celebrated by the industry. Founder Elle Jensen says the idea came to her when she was competing at an SCA event and a womxn said to her: "I'd never be brave enough to compete!"

"It made me sad because most of these womxn were obviously qualified and accomplished, but still not seen or empowered by their coworkers or employers," says Jensen. "I wanted to create a stage where they felt confident and welcome, rather than disregarded."

So, in 2017, the event changed from a competition specifically for female baristas to one that includes womxn/trans/femme/GNC/gender queer baristas. »

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHERRY ROAST

LIST OF RESOURCES

American Civil Liberties Union
aclu.org

Cherry Roast
facebook.com/cherryroast

#CoffeeToo
coffeetoooproject.com

Coffee Equity Toolkit
coffeeequitytoolkit.wikia.com

Crisis Text Line
crisistextline.org
24/7 Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

National Center for Transgender Equality
transequality.org

National Women's Law Center
nwlc.org

The Partnership for Gender Equity
genderincoffee.org

Portland Coffee Social Club
facebook.com/portlandcoffeesocialclub

Queer Coffee Events
queercoffeevents.com

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network
rainn.org
24/7 Hotline: 800-656-4673

#ShestheRoaster
shestheroaster.org

Trans Lifeline
translifeline.org
24/7 Hotline: 877-565-8860

United Association for Labor Education
uale.org

U.S. Department of Labor
dol.gov

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)
eoc.gov

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Jensen adds that getting over the hurdle of realizing that the original structure of Cherry Roast was just as harmful and exclusive to certain marginalized baristas “was a sad moment.”

“So many womxn, trans, femme, GNC, gender queer baristas/coffee professionals are skipped over for promotions, competitor spots, better shifts, and whatever else you might think of,” she says.

The fourth annual Cherry Roast competition took place at Copper Door Coffee in Denver on November 12, 2018, with 14 competitors, some of whom had competed before. The overall winner was Simone Rodriguez from Crema Coffee House.

“2018 felt especially heavy in this political climate, so it was very important for us that people felt seen, heard, and safe in the space,” says event organizer, Breezy Sanchez. “With that, we also wanted to bring some awareness about privilege so that people could fully

understand the scope of why this event is so important.”

One of the new aspects was the “check your privilege” component, where attendees were invited to identify which privileges they recognized within themselves.

“It feels like Cherry Roast is starting to beat its own heartbeat independent of the founder and the support staff, which is a beautiful thing,” says Sanchez. “There’s something to be said about strength in numbers, and creating an evening for the typically unseen, unheard, and invalidated barista. This is incredibly necessary, powerful, and inspiring....Sometimes it just takes one moment of recognition to breed a lifetime of success.”

Jensen adds she will only be happy once a “World Barista Championship stage is full of womxn, trans, femme, GNC, and gender queer baristas...and when cis/het white men are calling out inequality in their own workplace.”

Engaging Through Education

Taking an educational approach to create change are coffee educators from Stumptown Coffee, Erica Shafer and Kristi Persinger. Shafer and Persinger put together a presentation called “Women’s Impact on the Coffee Industry” to highlight women who made coffee history, women-led co-ops and farms, women in competition, and avenues that support equity, diversity, and inclusivity.

Shafer says that although the response about the presentations has been positive, with many thanking them for continuing the conversation, there is still a feeling of not being taken seriously.

“As a coffee educator, I find myself running into regular situations where I am treated like a novice in the classroom,” she says. “There are frequent instances of student baristas testing

my knowledge or challenging me. It’s ridiculous—I’m obviously the expert in the room, and they’re attending my class.”

However, she adds, “I have also felt lifted up by other women in the industry who experience similar situations, it feels like we’re fighting for equality together as a team.”

The coffee industry is slowly making less room for small-minded hiring. Shafer suggests the reasons behind that could be because coffee is international and people in the industry interact with each other closely to make specialty coffee work.

“A big part of breaking down walls and preconceived notions between individuals is storytelling, and what is a huge part of the specialty coffee industry? Knowing the stories of where your coffee comes from, knowing the stories of your equipment, knowing the stories of café trends happening throughout the world,” she says. “I

think this makes the coffee person used to highlighting stories that can be different from one’s own experience and therefore having an open mind and strong passion for standing up for human rights.”

Elevating All Voices

Coffee’s history is rooted in colonialism, inequality, slave labor, and poor working and living conditions for those who produce it. And as coffee professionals in serving rather than producing countries, “we understand, or are starting to understand, the need to elevate all of the voices of our industry to continue growing and thriving,” says Jensen.

In the last year, the number of activist coffee organizations has continued to grow—but why now?

To this, Jensen simply says, “We are all tired.”

“We are tired of seeing the same people promoted and on the competition stage, and tired of watching good

people leave the industry because of lack of opportunity and not lack of skill or professionalism,” she continues. “I’m personally tired of seeing baristas from marginalized groups having to fight so hard for the same stuff that I get inherently as a cis/het white woman.”

Ultimately, inequality and inequity are problems far and wide, and not one organization or not one individual can completely change the system.

“But if we can all work to change our small corner of the world then we’re doing something good and meaningful,” says Jensen, “and I think coffee people feel that.” ☕

Don't miss the second installment of "Coffee Activism," where Fresh Cup explores global movements and organizations empowering women in coffee, in our April issue.

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