



For MT

The desire for a decent cup of coffee motivated music production graduate Tara-Browne to open a chain of cafes.

[Expat's Daily Grind Is Coffee With a Conscience](#)

By Michael Shipley
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CHITA -- Walk into any of Christopher Tara-Browne's six Traveler's Coffee shops in Novosibirsk and you'll find more than just unusually good coffee. Beyond the artful lattes, behind the courteous smiles of the staff, lies something rarely found in any booming business -- a social conscience.

"We are the only coffee house in Russia selling organic, fair-trade coffee," Tara-Browne said.

He said that Traveler's Coffee, which roasts all of its own coffees, is part of the specialty coffee industry, which has become a veritable social movement unto itself. In an industry long dominated by major international coffee buyers, growers in developing countries have typically been squeezed out of profits and into poverty. In contrast, Tara-Browne said, "the specialty coffee movement emphasizes buying beans at fair prices, from growers who provide schooling for their workers' children and who don't use chemical fertilizers or pesticides on their crops."

Tara-Browne said he gave high priority to educating his staff and, through them, his customers on the ethics of enlightened coffee consumption. Traveler's Coffee menus are in the form of newsletters conveying the philosophy of the specialty coffee movement.

"We are planning entire walls dedicated to information about the growers, so customers will see whom they are supporting when they drink our coffee," he enthused. "It's all about sustainable development."

With a combined total of more than 800 square meters of floor space and nearly 200 employees,

Traveler's Coffee now plans to expand beyond Russia's borders into Mongolia and other Central Asian countries.

Twelve years ago, Tara-Browne was using his bachelor's degree in music production to help struggling bands in his native San Francisco to sign with music labels. At the same time, he was imbibing the exotic java and ideology developed by local coffee gurus who were pioneering the specialty coffee movement.

"I remember my first cup of really good espresso," he said with fervor. "It was almost a religious experience."

Still, Tara-Browne said he was dissatisfied with life in the United States.

"I felt there was something more out there. And as a member of the Baha'i Faith, which teaches world unity and service to humanity, I had a desire to go abroad and assist Baha'i communities just starting out."

While on a trip with fellow Baha'is to Novosibirsk in 1994, he felt drawn to the country and to the city.

"I love Russian people, and the kind of conversations we have," he said.

He extended his brief visit by a few months, then by one year, finally deciding to stay permanently. Now 38 years old, with a Russian wife and two small children, he sees no reason to leave.

But things didn't fall into place easily. Tara-Browne started out managing New York Pizza restaurants for another American in Novosibirsk before hitting on the idea of building his own coffee business.

"I had been in Russia for a couple of years and was always frustrated that I couldn't buy a decent cup of coffee anywhere," he said.

And while others in the same position might have been content to write home for some Starbucks, Tara-Browne convinced a friend and a relative to front him \$70,000 to open his first cafe and buy a coffee roaster.

Eight years and an array of foreign and Russian investors later, he has finally hit his stride.

"We rented out an entire 24-lane bowling alley for the company's New Year's bash," he said, somewhat in awe of the scale operations have reached.

"I have to be more careful now about the decisions I make because they affect so many people."

One of those decisions has already been controversial.

"We don't serve alcohol in our cafes," he said. "In part, this is due to my religious beliefs, but also drinking sort of ruins the whole idea of having an intellectual conversation over a cup of coffee."

And while such a policy may seem counter-intuitive in a culture that traditionally deems alcohol an integral part of life, Traveler's Coffee customers don't seem to mind.

"Occasionally, we even get businessmen in our cafes who sign contracts at the tables, exchange bundles of cash, then christen the deal by downing espresso instead of the usual vodka," he said.

As for what lies ahead for Traveler's Coffee, Tara-Browne quickly ticked off the points.

"We're going to blend our own teas using organic methods. Franchises will be available by autumn, and we'll open a full-service shopping place offering everything from beans to equipment to turnkey consultancy services. Our menu already includes pastas, salads, and in-house pastries and cakes that we plan to flash-freeze and distribute as well."

Where does Tara-Browne find the energy to do so many things at once? He paused from his animated banter and, with a wry smile, said, "I drink a lot of coffee."

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