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Coffee to get us through the winter

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

It's that time of year in the Midwest that I dread. The beauty of the first snow is behind us. Now it's gray, muddy and hard to walk anywhere in a car-oriented town. Our city needs to figure out how it can afford to plow if another blizzard comes. Some say we are already over budget from the 17 inches we got one early December day. The excitement of family reunions from the holiday season is over. Now it'll be a miracle if we see our loved ones for a few months while everyone holes up and hibernates during the next couple of cold months.

Being holed up means more time for catching up on books, writing and movies. All these winter activities in Wisconsin typically involve a fresh pot of coffee. And that makes it a time of year to revisit where we get our coffee. It depends on who goes shopping, but we typically buy bags of the Breakfast Blend from a local roaster that distributes at our local grocery store. I like their business because they support many local organizations through corporate giving and providing beans for coffee tasting fundraisers at the local Rape Crisis Center.

However, my sister-in-law recently had an opportunity to work for TransFair USA and host a coffee-tasting contest in Brazil. She had been volunteering for months at TransFair. She was about to go back to her old retail job for the holidays but then they called her up and wanted to send her to Brazil to help coordinate the coffee-tasting contest. They kept a blog if you want to read more about it.

This contest was sponsored by TransFair USA, USAID, Sebrae-MG, and Walmart (yes, that Walmart). As reported in PR NewsWire, the contest culminated months of training for local farmers on how to bring their coffee beans to an international market. The contest was attended by many government officials from Brazil and the United States, as well as international coffee buyers.

She came to visit us shortly after she returned, and of course, brought back some fresh coffee from some

of the finalists that she was fond of. What this did is rejuvenate our understanding of how a product that we consume nearly every day (and sometimes several times a day) gets into our drip pot or French press.



A couple years ago, while in a class on the Prophets, we traveled to

San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala, as part of the class. I spent a morning with a local coffee roaster, and learned about how grueling of a process it is. The part of the process I saw involved roasting the beans, and then spreading them out on a wire surface that helped remove dust and other impurities from the beans. We used palettes to sift through the coffee, keep it moving amidst all the heat so that the beans wouldn't burn and stick to each other. Dust was flying anywhere -- between the heat on my hands and the dust in my lungs, it was a very uncomfortable experience. After all the cups of coffees and soy vanilla mochas I've consumed, I had no idea how grueling it was to get to that soothing place of consumption. My sister-in-law's experience confirmed what I saw in Guatemala: most of the roasters and growers don't even drink their own coffee. They stick with inexpensive buckets of Folgers and instant coffees.

Perhaps you are sitting down with a fresh cup of coffee right now to read this. In a time of resolutions, I hope we can all take the next step to understand where our coffee (and other food and beverage products) came from and how they got to our kitchen. There are ways you can get coffee almost directly from the roaster. The Diocese of New Ulm, Minn., offers coffee right from the San Lucas Toliman roasters and growers in Guatemala (although they have seen a shortage in coffee production this year because of drought and may not be able to fill your order). You can also look for Fair Trade Certified USA labels (the one offered by TransFair USA covers not just environmental standards but also workplace standards).

It's now time for this article to end and for you to get up for a fresh cup of brew. I hope you'll take some of these ideas into consideration to expand your imagination about how just a cup of coffee can be.

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