

## Interview With Steve Smith

Master Roaster for Fonte Coffee Roaster and Cafe & Wine Bar

By [Nathan Williams](#), About.com Guide

Steve Smith is passionate about coffee. The Master Roaster for [Fonte Coffee](#) and its new [Cafe & Wine Bar](#) in Seattle is a maestro of the roast, a virtuoso of the blend. He has immersed himself in every step of the process from the coffee bush to your cup.

After a decade at Starbucks, he joined with Paul Odom to found a small Seattle roasting company entirely dedicated to the best possible product. Their volume is relatively small but that have a worldwide clientele (The Four Seasons, St. Regis Peninsula). In 2009, after offering their coffees only through direct order or

Uptown Espresso, they opened a dedicated Cafe & Wine Bar downtown.



© Fonte Coffee Roaster

I met with Steve at his Georgetown roasting facility.

### **How did you get started with coffee?**

I started in 1979. I graduated from Washington State University and lingered in Pullman. A friend of mine had moved to Seattle a year before and gotten a job with Starbucks, which was a little coffee roasting company with one store down in the market.

### **Was it called Starbucks at the time?**

It was. But it was Starbucks Coffee, Tea, and Spice Company. Shortly after [my friend] began working there they opened up another store. By the time I came on we were opening up a third store. And I started out in the tea department, unloading tea, blending tea, bagging tea.

Occasionally unloading coffee from containers. And shortly got into the roasting program.

**Did you come to that as a coffee lover?**

I came to it as someone looking for a job. As I remember I started at \$4.50 an hour. For me isn't wasn't so much a matter of always wanting to work in the coffee business, but rather "I'm interested in coffee and I need a job," but then it began to grow on me. I was fortunate enough to get in with a lot of really good coffee people, many of whom are still working there.

**How has the way we drink coffee changed since then?**

Even when I started in the late 70s, there was very little going on with coffees that were anything but supermarket, canned coffees. I remember when I was a kid living in Seattle, you used to have to go up to Vancouver B.C. to get decent coffee. A place called Murchie's was the only place around. The founders of Starbucks were this group of friends--one of them would drive up to Vancouver and buy a bunch of coffee and split it up amongst the rest of them. Through that process they thought, wow, there's a potential niche here.

This was at a time when Peet's coffee in California had been up and going for a while. The founders of Starbucks looked to [Peet's] for guidance. So the original Starbucks concept looks a lot like the Peet's concept: the color scheme, the way things are laid out, the products offered. That original concept just catapulted itself into the national consciousness, largely around the concept of milk-based espresso drinks, such that the whole concept of specialty coffee—the idea that there might be a coffee beverage that is worth three or four times what the going rate was for a cup of coffee, all of those ideas were originally placed in the national consciousness through the success of Starbucks.

**You said you got started in the tea department. Have you stayed passionate about tea?**

Absolutely. Tea is interesting in that it comes to you as a finished product. It's not so much that you're producing it. There is some blending involved. And then it's largely evaluating samples and making decisions on what teas to buy.

When you talk to tea vendors on the phone and you're calling from the coffee world, they're so mellow. There's these long pauses. I imagine them breezing into work at quarter after nine, making a few pots of tea, and chatting about Buddhism, Taoism. Meanwhile, in the coffee world, we've bought 60 containers already—we're going, we're going. So it's nice to have an interface with that.

Tea is a lot like coffee in as much as the final product has to do with the climate, the soil conditions, the way the tea's been processed, the way it's packaged. All those things come into play in the results in the cup. And people that we've been doing business with for a long time, it's always interesting to see the little variations are going to be year-to-year. It's very analogous to coffee.

**How connected are you with the source of your beans?**

Occasionally I go to origin, and take an origin trip. There's always something. You take a farm trip and think, wow, this is my 105th farm trip, but you always find something a little different.

I graduated with a degree in Spanish. That has served me well traveling around Latin America and being able to connect not just with the exporters or the co-op manager, but with the guy on the ground who's actually living there. People are so nice it's just ridiculous. You come down and they feed you and show you all around and introduce you to the kids, it's great.

I don't get to do that as much as I would like, but I think the idea that it's necessary to go there to make your buying decisions is ill-founded. I do better work in that regard up here with 20 different Costa Ricans from different places in Costa Rica, trying to decide which is the one that's going to hit the mark for us.

**Do you ever make suggestions to these farmers?**

Those of us on the roasting side, you need to be delicate. A lot of these growers are third, fourth generation, and it's "Dad did it this way, Granddad did it this way." I think it's safe to say that in the Starbucks heyday period, from the '80s into the mid-'90s, a lot of what we were experiencing in increased cup quality had to do with how the coffee was handled after it was in the U.S. From about '95 until today, I think most of the increase in quality we see has to do with what's going on in the producing countries, based on information they've received from people like me.

**How does coffee tasting compare to wine tasting?**

There's a lot of cross-over, and it's mostly in the direction of from wine to coffee. Coffee was introduced into Europe in the late 1600s, so it's been around for a while, but compared into wine it's a relatively young beverage. So the wine model has been useful in many regards. There are a lot of similarities in the approach. What people are looking to do is go from "here's coffee" to "here's a Guatemala from the El Sopollo Farm outside of Antigua" in the same way that a wine might be described. So it was kind of natural to take on the wine terminology.

People have been cupping coffee for a really long time, in terms of formally evaluating their flavor. Within the past ten years or so a bunch of methods for recording and analyzing subjective results in coffee tasting have come out, many of them revolve around points systems in the way that wines often are.

**What's your favorite roast right now?**

We've got a Cup of Excellence Guatemala right now that we bought at the auction last year, and it's currently top of the pops for me. However, that's when we're talking French press. We developed an espresso blend, primary designed to be a self-drinker, not so much if you mix it with milk, that we developed for the café, that we're constantly tweaking with as we go along. We have a Brazil, that's just a beautiful coffee as a single shot. I like that one a lot too.

It's interesting to see what catches people's fancy when they're first coming into the world of coffee that offers these powerful flavors. Sometimes they go for the lighter more acidic coffee, which is often a reflection of what less expensive grocery coffees might be like and it's not such a huge jump. Some Indonesian coffees, Sumatra in particular, is very popular with neophytes. It's much less acidic, great big body, real interesting herbal-style aromas. Myself when I was first getting into coffee I think I drank Sumatra as my recreational coffee for about a year.

**Why Seattle?**

I did grow up here, so I can lord it over everybody else—that's always fun. I've had opportunities to be elsewhere, but I like Seattle, my family, all the things that tie you to a particular location. There's virtually no place I can go here that doesn't have some association for me. That can be appealing or people can move 3,000 miles to be away from that.