

ABOUT THE FIRESTARTER



**Who are you and what is your job title?**

*My name is David Thompson, and I am the owner and founder of Dark City Coffee Company. I was also involved with the founding of The Coffee Tree here in Toronto back in 1985.*

**How many years have you been roasting?**

*I have been roasting for 23 years.*

**What roasting equipment have you used?**

*Jabez Burns three-barrel and four-barrel sample roasters, Diedrich IR-12 (25 lbs.) then another, newer model IR-12 (30 lbs.). In June 2009, I added another Diedrich IR-12 and configured the roasters in a small circle where I could operate all three simultaneously. Also a 30-kilogram Turkish-made Topper.*

DAVID THOMPSON

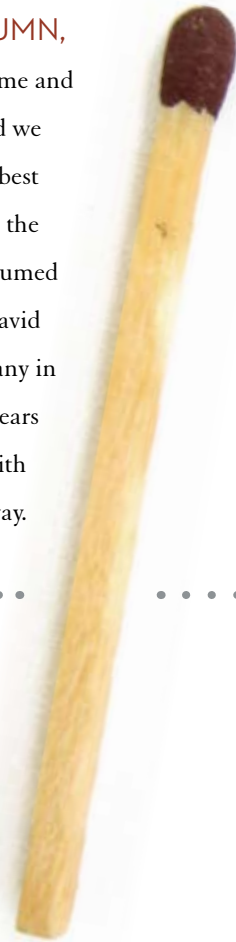
— DARK CITY COFFEE COMPANY —

**IN THIS FIRESTARTERS COLUMN,**

we regularly celebrate the use of the flame and what we are able to achieve with it. And we ask each Firestarter to tell us his or her best fire story. Well, as much as we celebrate the flame, what happens when we are consumed by it? What will rise from the ashes? David Thompson of Dark City Coffee Company in Toronto shares some insights from 23 years of roasting, including how to rebuild with roasting what the flames have taken away.

**Christopher Schooley:** How did you become a coffee roaster?

**David Thompson:** It wasn't until I moved out from my parents' home when I was 19 that I discovered the world of coffee through various retailers in Toronto. I would buy a different selection every time, eagerly take it home and prepare a cup using a French press. I became friends with a guy in my apartment building who had the same interest in coffee, and soon a sort of competition ensued. We would try to purchase the rarest or most unusual origins, and when one of us was visiting the other, we would spring it on the other for bragging rights. One summer day, back in the early '80s at his parents' home, he was preparing one of these prized coffees for us and we were nattering on about it like schoolgirls. At the time, his aunt was visiting from Austria, and she overheard our carrying on. She exclaimed, "Uh, you North Americans know nothing about coffee; back in Austria we line up at the local roaster for the roast of the day." My friend and I looked at each other with the one question on both of our minds: What's this roasting thing all about? Over the following few



years, we researched and planned to open the first retail coffee shop in Toronto that roasted coffee on site each day. In 1986, we opened our flagship store on Yonge Street, roasting coffee every day as demand dictated.

**CS:** What is your favorite part of roasting, and what do you find the most challenging?

**DT:** When I am roasting, I don't take calls and I don't even like anyone speaking to me. I get into a rhythm and focus so intensely that it becomes a form of meditation. I have a sweet sound system in my shop, and the tunes have to be slammin'. We generally listen to house, downtempo, breakbeat and funk. It is only when I am coming close to the end of my roasting day that I start to take in my surroundings and engage my fellow workers. It's always an exhilarating time of the day because I can see what I have accomplished, and I feel energized because of my focus. The cupping table also generates a lot of excitement for my employees and me. I love when a coffee jumps off the table, and there is no question that we have just cupped something rare and exceptional. That said, my greatest difficulty as a roaster is keeping a supply of remarkable coffees in-house.

**CS:** You offer private custom roasts, roasted in individual batches. What has your experience with that been like?

**DT:** My passion for roasting still belongs to custom roasting one pound at a time for my private clients. It's most rewarding when I start with a new client, listen to their wishes and come up with a bean or blend that fits the bill. If it's not exactly what they were looking for, we have established a starting point upon which we can discuss the taste. I'll listen to their thoughts and then I can accurately tweak the selection next time around. One question that is asked often is, "What's the best coffee?" My reply is, "What's the best vegetable?"

**CS:** Take me through what a regular roasting day is like for you.

**DT:** I am an early riser and usually arrive at work around 6 a.m. My seven-minute commute is miraculous, and for most of the year it takes place in quiet darkness. Before anything happens, I get the tunes going and then collect any final orders before starting my roast day. After oiling the sample roaster and lighting the flames, I fire up the three Diedrichs for the warm-up. Once all the machinery is up to temperature I start loading each one with a five-minute delay between each. Then I'll walk a continuous circle of checking each roaster and making the necessary adjustments in order to meet the profile. This goes on along with the loading, unloading and packaging of

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the coffee without break for about six hours. If it's not a heavy production day, I will prepare the cupping table with current offerings and invite the staff to participate, writing down their assessment. We're always eager to see if we picked up on the same characteristics. The roasters are cleaned meticulously every day, and at week's end we pull apart one of the Diedrichs and perform a deep cleaning. I like the shop to look as if it were going to be filmed that day.

**CS:** Can you tell me your best fire story?

**DT:** In 1998, I had two cafe roasteries operating with 30 employees. The first location pretty much ran on its own and was hugely successful. The second location was larger and offered a bar/restaurant. Most of my time was spent there, roasting and trying to make it profitable. That is where I was when I received a phone call from my manager at the (first) location. He said, "You'd better get over here, there's been a fire." I replied, "Well, how bad is it?" He said, "It's serious, get over here now." So I jumped on my motorcycle and raced to Forest Hill, which was a 20-minute ride. As I approached my shop, I crested the hill, which marks the beginning of the village, consisting of 50 shops and restaurants. The sight of the entire village cordoned off by police and firemen paralyzed me. I had to leave my bike outside the perimeter and set off on foot toward my shop. I can remember



everything appeared in slow motion as people approached me, one after another, with face expressions ranging from horror to tears to condolence. I walked up to my shop entrance, which was black and had fire hoses snaking inside. The adjoining businesses were in similar condition. The front window was in tiny pebbles on the ground, so I stepped through and saw a black, wet, soulless

shell of what used to be my business. I was told that the employee who was roasting lost track of time while making a latte for a customer, and I'm sure you can figure out what happened from there.

It took almost a year to sort out the insurance and rebuild the shop. I took it upon myself to borrow money to upgrade the shop into another bar/restaurant/roastery. Since my business was so successful prior to the fire, I figured with the addition of the bar/restaurant that I would be king of the village. However, due to factors beyond my control and my customers becoming regulars at competing cafes, when I re-opened almost a year later, the sales never came back, and within eight months I was bankrupt and both cafes closed.

I managed to buy back one of my three-cylinder sample roasters from the bank using money borrowed from my parents. I set it up in a friend's studio and started over, roasting twice a week, then getting in my Sidekick and delivering the same day. Clients loved the coffee and service so much that I didn't have to advertise, and the business grew exponentially each year. The fire

## A ROASTING TIP FROM DAVID THOMPSON

*"The best tip I can give is to stay focused while roasting. That means no phone calls, no conversation longer than a couple of sentences, and no multi-tasking. I always say to people who try to engage me while I am roasting, 'The best case scenario is I ruin some precious beans and the worst case is the entire building goes up in flames.'"*

was a mixed blessing, and without it I wouldn't be enjoying my life and work as much as I do now.

*CHRISTOPHER SCHOOLEY drinks his coffee black. Chris and fire go way back. Tell him your fire stories, or suggest a future Firestarter, at ceschooley@yahoo.com.*

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