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S E R V I N G P E O P L E S E R V I N G C O F F E E

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M A G A Z I N E

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DOUBLE DUTCH: ROSE VAN ASTEN & LIESBETH SLEIJSTER CHAMPION SPECIALTY COFFEE IN HOLLAND

COMPILED BY SARAH ALLEN

PHOTOS BY GERBEN HETTINGA



Getting great coffee in the Netherlands is more difficult than you'd think. Like New York and San Francisco a few years ago, the city of Amsterdam is known for having a sophisticated food culture, and yet, is surprisingly underdeveloped, comparatively, in terms of specialty coffee. Superb cafés and high quality roasted coffee certainly exist; however, they're few and far between.

But Rose van Asten and Liesbeth Sleijster want to change all that. When these two twentysomethings announced in 2009 that they were pooling forces and starting their own coffee company in Holland, called Cocoon Coffee, no one close to the European specialty coffee scene was very surprised. Rose and Liesbeth are long standing fixtures in the elite international coffee world—both are former Dutch Barista Champions; Liesbeth, in fact, made history for Holland when she won third place at the World Barista Championship in 2008 by placing her country higher in the standings than ever before or since. And Rose, a two-time Dutch Barista Champion, and a former Dutch Latte Art Champ, as well, left barista competitions in 2008 to pursue competitive cupping, and is the two-time cupping champion of Holland.

Of course, they're undeniably lovely, and always great fun to have at our industry's social coffee events. But make no mistake: Rose and Liesbeth are some fierce coffee professionals, and their company, at just a year old, is already a success.

"The name says it all," says Liesbeth of Cocoon Coffee. "We aim to be that place where something beautiful like a caterpillar has the chance to pop into an even more beautiful butterfly. Our goal is to get people excited about coffee, to educate them and improve coffee standards as a whole. Good can always be better."

We at *Barista Magazine* have known Rose since she competed for Holland at the World Barista Championship in Italy in 2004, and Liesbeth since she worked as a volunteer at the Nordic Barista Cup in Sweden in 2007. We've always been struck by their intelligence and their instincts for coffee business and quality, and so when they told us they were forming their own company, we anticipated greatness for them.

Visiting together during the Nordic Barista Cup in Oslo, Norway, this past September, Rose,

Liesbeth and I had a wonderful conversation about their histories, their goals for specialty coffee, and the culture of coffee in Holland. Here's how it went.

SARAH ALLEN: How did you meet each other initially, and how did that lead to the development of Cocoon Coffee?

LIESBETH SLEIJSTER: When I moved to Nijmegen (in Holland) I was looking for work, and went to the café, the Blonde Pater. They were looking for employees and I knew they were into coffee, but at that time I had never even heard the word barista. On my first day, I worked together with Rose and it's funny, but it was her last day at the Blonde Pater! After work, we ate together and talked about our lives. I remember it was very special. Rose left the Blonde Pater and I continued to work there, and I loved it from the first moment on. After three months, unexpectedly, Rose returned to the Blonde Pater and from that moment on, we have been working together. She had already competed in the barista championships three times, and I decided to join her. We trained a lot together and had a lot of fun. The first time I competed, Rose became Dutch Barista Champion, and I came in second. So it was very cool, you can imagine! We went to the World Barista Championships in Switzerland (in 2006) together where Rose competed. Over the next few years, we worked at the Blonde Pater, and we trained for several coffee championships. Eventually we both left the Blonde Pater, and I started work as an independent barista while Rose worked for a roasting company. Two years ago, after the World Barista Championships in Copenhagen, we decided to join forces and that's how our business and lovechild, Cocoon Coffee, was born.

ROSE VAN ASTEN: What I really enjoy is that we are different. Most people would say that makes it harder to work together, but having the same



FROM THE MOMENT I GOT TO SEATTLE IN 2004, A WHOLE WONDERFUL WORLD OF COFFEE OPENED UP TO ME. I'VE BEEN HOOKED EVER SINCE. —ROSE

although we sometimes need a day to let things digest. Liesbeth is very creative and can see things from a lot of different perspectives. Things I wouldn't even dream of. And I have a bit of a nerdy side—I love numbers and structure. So I take care of the administrative part of the business. What we do together is make coffee and play with coffees, and give trainings.

SARAH: Please explain specifically what Cocoon Coffee does.

ROSE: We do events: making coffees, presentations, workshops, all kinds of barista trainings and consultancy. We help people choose coffees and machines, and we help them with the logistics behind the bar. Events could be anybody from bank firms to family get-togethers. Presentations are often at barista-orientated events by roasters, a milk company, etc. Consultancy is often combined within a whole project where we help cafés to set up. We help them with consultancy, different barista trainings (basic barista techniques, latte art, advanced barista training, and anything else that has to do with coffee that people want to learn). Single trainings are often requested by cafés that have had trainings but want to learn more, or coffee roasters that want their staff to know more about the barista workmanship.

SARAH: Tell me a bit about your personal backgrounds.

LIESBETH: I grew up in a village in the east of Holland. My mother was always at home for me, and she actually gave me filter coffee with whipped cream when I was four, which I loved. My father worked at an office. When I was 18, I moved to Amsterdam. I started working in a coffee shop—a real one—but the word barista didn't even exist in Holland yet. I didn't know what to study; I had some thoughts about being a psychologist, teacher or interior designer. I tried some studies, but moved from place to place and rather enjoyed life by going to house parties and meeting up with friends. I loved to work with people and especially to give people a good time or moment. When I moved to Nijmegen, I met my boyfriend and started working as a barista at the Blonde Pater and doing coffee competitions.

ROSE: I was born in Swaziland, which is a tiny country in South Africa,

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and I lived there until I was four. Then my parents got a scholarship at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Md., so we moved there for a year. Then we lived in Holland for a bit, but since we (me and two of my sisters) couldn't speak Dutch very well, we went to an international school. When I was seven, we moved to Tanzania for the following six years in total (but halfway through we lived in Holland for two years). My dad was working for the World Health Organization and my mom was working in the hospital of Dar es Salaam and teaching at the medical university. This is actually the first time I got in touch with coffee. We always had fresh coffee beans. My mom would let me help prepare coffee, but I always had to close the tin (yellow with a giraffe and Kilimanjaro in the background) quickly after pouring the beans in the grinder. The grinder was tiny with two sharp blades, so I don't think the coffee was ground evenly! Then my mom would pour the just boiled water very slowly over the coffee in the filter—maybe she should have been a barista. I still remember the smell. Then we would take the coffee outside on the veranda where we had our breakfast with the whole family.

SARAH: When did you each discover specialty coffee?

ROSE: I really discovered coffee 11 years ago when I started working in the café where I eventually ended up working for 10 years! The first thing I heard was that the Mistral was the boss' baby. That boss was Louis. This past year has been quite emotional, as Louis passed away in June. To me he was a father, a friend and a mentor.

I used to be really shy although people hardly believe me these days. I wanted to avoid talking to the customers in any possible way, so I decided to be the best at making coffee—that way, I could hide behind the espresso machine. I had no idea of the existence of a barista at that time. Louis noticed my drive for making the best coffee and guided me as much as he could showing me DVDs of David Schomer. This is how we also learned latte art. Then he started telling me I should compete. Me? No way! But I didn't want to tell him I was scared, so before I knew it, I was competing in barista championships. 2003 was the first time I did it. I spent five days a week training at Louis' and his wife, Nicky's, house. We would go to every coffee event in Holland and worldwide. The first time I got introduced to specialty coffee was in Seattle in 2004. Until that moment I thought coffee was OK but it wasn't interesting enough. I thought I would finish my studies in child psychology and that would be the end of coffee for me. But from the moment I got to Seattle, a whole wonderful world of coffee opened up to me. I've been hooked ever since.

LIESBETH: When I started at the Blonde Pater, I already knew they did 'something' with coffee. The owner and my teacher, Louis Claus, and his wife, Nicky, were my inspiration to get into specialty coffee. Louis asked if I wanted to compete in the Dutch Barista Championship, and I said yes. At that moment, I knew this could change my life and my future, although at that time I couldn't imagine that we would own Cocoon Coffee like we do today. The training for championships made me aware of the endless possibilities in taste and technique, and that is where the journey started. When I went to the World Championship in Switzerland as a visitor, I tasted some great coffees, and I remember I was walking around high on caffeine, completely overwhelmed. That's when I realized that I wanted to become a finalist. I have always loved taste and drinks and serving 'a moment' to people, and specialty coffee created so many opportunities.

SARAH: How do you apply what you learned from competition experience to your work with Cocoon Coffee?

ROSE: I have gained a lot of confidence and I have learned to have patience, by making espresso over and over and over again. It has also trained my tasting capabilities. I don't believe you can change your palate, but you can learn to use what you already have.

LIESBETH: When people ask me why I don't compete anymore, I say that our business is my new competition. Having this business is having a goal and really going for it. The difference is there is no time limit and you can work on it every day, and even make money doing what you like! Of course, we apply everything we have learned into our trainings and work. We have learned to keep on going until we get to the very best result in a coffee. To keep ourselves updated, we travel to all kinds of events and follow trainings, and Rose still competes in the cupping championships.

SARAH: Please tell me about the specialty coffee scene in Holland. How is it good, and what needs improvement?

LIESBETH: Over the last five years in Holland, coffee has gotten more and more attention. Baristas just came out of nowhere! The championships draw many competitors—over 40 last year! This is all very good. But when you talk about specialty coffee, Holland's trap is that it's a trading country. The Dutch love to trade and make money out of things and many times only focus on the sale. So what you see is that it looks good and flashy to be a barista: a cool barista with a great machine, pretty looking coffee bag and cups, but they forget about the taste and knowledge. They might have had one workshop and think they make great coffee. Of course, that's not possible.

You see a lot of interest in specialty coffee, but many times I wonder if some of them know what a good espresso or coffee is or what it can taste like. If owners and baristas would invest much, much more time, attention and money in knowledge about the craft and the product, you could drink so much more great coffee in Holland. But on the other hand, companies do take trainings and workshops nowadays, where they didn't in the past. So awareness of and interest in coffee and quality is increasing. It will, however, take time to get a good overall coffee quality in the Netherlands.

ROSE: 'How is it good'—that is a hard question, especially because I feel things can always get better. I feel that there isn't really a specialty coffee scene in Holland. Of course, we do have two or three roasters that roast specialty coffee, but for the most it is, sadly, Holland's best-kept secret. So for improvement the Dutch coffee industry should find out about it and let it become common knowledge. There are a couple of people working on it, but it's just a handful.

SARAH: Finally, could you share with us your favorite way to drink coffee?

LIESBETH: In the morning I usually drink one or two kofficinos—that's what we call it. Translated, it's coffeiccino, which is a small cappuccino in a coffee cup. And I love to drink filter coffee at any

time. I don't drink a lot of coffee in a day. Espresso I mostly drink when I have to test a coffee. I love it when a coffee is sweet and fruity, soft, buttery and elegant with a long aftertaste. And I like to drink it from a beautiful cup or glass. Of course, a beautiful cup doesn't make a bad coffee taste good, but it can make a good coffee taste even better.

ROSE: If I could choose only one I think that I would choose a form of pour over—I could drink that all day. I love espresso, but it's like filled chocolate—so much flavor and intensity that my mouth gets over stimulated. I would rather not drink it constantly. And I must admit to the milk sin: early in the morning, I love a small cappuccino, with not too much milk, but nice and creamy, so that it's almost like a cup of hot cacao. **b**

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