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## Adventures of the Globetrotting Coffee King AMIR GEHL in conversation with THIERRY MACQUET



Coffee Maestro Amir Gehl met Thierry Macquet four years ago through a mutual friend, Tom Harrow—aka the WineChap. At that time, Thierry's idea of coffee was going to Starbucks; he knew nothing about it. After knowing Amir, he now considers himself to be a specialty coffee guru.

Amir's Difference Coffee Co. has grown into one of the world's most respected specialty coffee suppliers to the culinary industry and discerning individuals alike—beans to the former and Nespresso-compatible capsules to the latter. But Amir isn't just a consummate tastemaker, he's a man with a vision: he's changing the way we think about, the 'black nectar'.

Amir and Thierry met at Annabel's in Mayfair to drink beautiful coffee, smoke cigars and chat about the inspiration behind the Difference Coffee Company.

**TM:** Funny how we met through someone who's in wine up to his neck. At that time your passion was champagne, you were just branching out into coffee.

**AG:** Yes. Though I'm more of a red wine drinker than champagne. I do like champagne, who doesn't? But wine's really a big passion of mine. But I wouldn't necessarily say that my love for wine got me into coffee because that's not what happened. Certainly it was instrumental in the way that I approached the subject of how to launch Difference Coffee Co. and create a brand. But five or six years ago I wasn't really a coffee drinker—I was a tea drinker.

**TM:** So, how did your passion for coffee begin?

**AG:** My wife got us to buy an espresso machine. So, I said, "Okay, I've got to try coffee. If I have a machine at home, I might as well get into it and start learning a little bit more about coffee." And I did. I got into this whole world and discovered that, much like great teas or great wines, you've got great coffees.

**TM:** And what happened next?

**AG:** Well, when I started I didn't know anything. So I thought about all of those wine makers, all of those estates, the Napa ones, for example. If you look at people like Bill Harlan who's got the Harlan Estate, he was in property but wanted to get into wine. So, he bought a piece of land and he got a wine maker. I followed the same path. I found Johnny England, a licensed coffee quality grader, known as a Q Grader, to work with me, and I got him to do the roasting, much in the same way that somebody who's into wine would do it. There're lots of parallels between the wine world and the coffee world, and that's the way that I've approached this project.

“You have this growing movement where people have always been into artisanal products and experiences.”

**TM:** Is it your aim to one day get Difference Coffee as well known as Krug?

**AG:** Not so much Krug, more like Salon. It's a family business, and it's a small brand with a limited production. If you look at Dom Perignon, for example, they're producing a million-plus bottles a year. It's difficult to keep the standards as high as you would like to with those figures. It's still a great brand, a great champagne, but was it like that 20, 30, 40 years ago? I'm not convinced.

Things evolve. To be part of the coffee society, pre-war, was more of an intellectual statement. Coffee Houses were more about people

gathering, not what you were drinking, that was secondary. Nowadays it's changed completely; people are becoming connoisseurs, and, I would say sometimes, even a bit elitist! Did you know the first coffee shop in Europe was established in Oxford?

**TM:** Really? I didn't know that.

**AG:** Yes, the Queen's Lane Coffee House!

**TM:** I would've thought it would have been in Vienna or somewhere like that.

**AG:** You would think... But then women started complaining because their husbands would go to the coffee shops and get a buzz on the caffeine. Apparently, there were women's movements to stop men from drinking coffee!

**TM:** But they would still binge drink in pubs.

**AG:** Exactly, that's fine... Eventually, coffee got replaced by tea. Now of course it's coming back. I think there's a shift taking place in society. You have this growing movement where people have always been into artisanal products and experiences.

Look at ultra-luxury fashion brands back in the day. They were consumed by the elite because they had more money, but essentially they were paying for the best in the class. What's happening now is that those brands are becoming mass market. The younger generation of chefs are saying, "Okay, we don't want just coffee. We want provenance, we want to know who the farmers are." Some even travel to seek out a particular farm which grows a particularly great bean, and they'd feature it on their menu; that's what specialty roasters do nowadays.

**TM:** There definitely seems to be a new coffee culture happening.

**AG:** It's not surprising! Coffee's one of the most complex drinks in the world. Wine has

about 300 volatile compounds. Coffee has over 1000. It's not just about getting your caffeine fix. Brewing coffee in an espresso machine takes 25-30 seconds; that's what it should take for either a single or a double. You want to get a certain amount of liquid out that will extract the optimal amount of flavours. If it brews too quickly, say for 10 seconds, you need to give the coffee a little more resistance, by grinding it finer, to help the extraction. Under-extracted coffee is sour; if it is over-extracted, it's too bitter.

Some of the best coffee shops in the world are small, they're tattered, and their furniture's not as expensive as their equipment. They look horrible, yet they've spent £3,000 on a coffee grinder!

**TM: That's a trend which will probably change; Michelin-star restaurants are looking for people like you.**

**AG:** Chefs are always looking for great ingredients. French chefs, in particular, and some British ones too, are ingredient-driven. I cook, but chefs are like artists, they care about quality. Give them an ingredient and they create something special. Some are more classical, some more eccentric, but I admire them for what they do. I love chefs, I love food...

Anne-Sophie Pic is one of my dearest patrons. In an interview we did together she said she can't create a menu without having coffee as part of the ingredients because it adds so much flavour. For her, coffee is a perfume. I totally agree.

**TM: I imagine it's quite subtle, the way she uses it, that you wouldn't even notice it; more in puddings, I suppose?**

**AG:** It's all about adding tasty bitterness. Not just for tiramisu and opéra cake, but coffee can also be used in steak rubs, sauces for game...

**TM: Foie gras in France? I've had quite a few...**

**AG:** Foie gras, and beetroot salad with coffee dressing and stuff like that. Anne-Sophie infuses her butter with coffee. When you have her bread and butter, it's with a coffee infusion; it's really delicious.

**TM: Did she start to use coffee as an ingredient because of you?**

**AG:** Not at all! She got in touch with me and we discussed coffee. She likes to work with local suppliers because she wants freshness as much as possible, and quality. She asked if I could supply her with coffee for La Dame de Pic in London. And we've had a great relationship since. I've been introducing her to some coffees she's never heard of, and she even introduced me to a coffee I hadn't heard of called Bourbon Pointu, a varietal of Arabica, which I then bought at auction. So, I feed off the chefs as well—it's exciting to learn from them, and to share things too.

**TM: Are all your relationships with the chefs you meet so close and easy?**

**AG:** I'm not going to lie, there's been a few you

go to and show them a coffee, and they don't necessarily care because they don't drink coffee. Or because they have a relationship with a brand that might have paid them to use a product. That's disheartening, and that happens in the industry. But, then you have the more independent chefs, the ones that really care about every single ingredient—Anne-Sophie, Sat Bains, Guy Savoy, chefs with a lot of integrity and who cannot be bought.

**TM: That's usually resented more than anything.**

**AG:** Yes. They just want to be independent because they do it for a passion for their art. Imagine you say to an artist, "Okay, you have to use this paint to paint your picture." It's ridiculous. And the good ones, they will appreciate quality and choose what they like, and that's great.

People assume there's a correlation between wealth and high quality ingredients. But I know a lot of very wealthy people that don't care about stuff like that. A lot of our customers are people that you wouldn't expect to invest in good quality coffee. They're just people who enjoy tasty things. People who enjoy art, food and wine. A lot of my clients love good restaurants—and tea too!

**TM: Chefs are beginning to realise they need to invest in quality, and there'll be a chain effect. Clearly you've arrived at the right time.**

**AG:** So, for me, I was just lucky to find these rare, competition-winning coffees, excellent ingredients that I can bring to the chefs and say, "Hey guys, look, here's something that nobody has ever given you before, would you like some?"

**TM: You're working with some of the world's most decorated chefs like Anne-Sophie and Alain Passard, and top class restaurants and bars like Annabel's and Harry's Bar. But you also have a relationship with the farmers.**

**AG:** Yes, I'm involved in everything, every step of the production process—literally from farm to cup.

**TM: That's vertical integration! But alongside the glam part of it all—some of it from the outside can look very 'show off'—you're also helping many poorer farming communities. How are you doing that?**

**AG:** You are talking about some of the poorest farmers in the world. Most coffee growers have never drunk coffee, which is absurd, right? And the reason is because coffee cherries primarily grow once a year, there are few exceptions, but over most of the world they grow only once a year. So, during the rest of the year the farmers grow other things. During harvest most farmers would pick the coffee and send it off to be processed. Now, the farms that do take care and attention and do their own processing as well, they need to get paid a little bit more.



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Amir Gehl  
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So if the cost of production is \$2 and they're selling for \$3, the second you've got people saying, "We'll give you \$4" they're doubling their profit, it's massive! We take it to the utmost level because we follow the coffee auctions. There, instead of getting \$3 a kilo, the farmer might get \$3 a pound, or \$10 a pound, or \$30 a pound. This is something that's being driven by the speciality coffee community; practices that are really good for promoting social values, equality, and sustainability. Most people just see the end result, they don't think about what happens at the farm level, but this is really important.

**TM: How do you explain a Russian/German man whose family suddenly moved to Israel, what, two generations ago...?**

**AG:** Yes, during the Second World War...

**TM: And your family made a fortune in tobacco, then you moved to London, and are now dealing in coffee...**

**AG:** Quite a transition, eh?

**TM: Quite. What's the story? Is there anything sexy in it?**

**AG:** My grandfather was an industrialist. He used to be part-owner of a company in Germany called Reemtsma Tobacco Company that got sold to Imperial Tobacco, and our family shares got confiscated by the Nazis. But we were able to escape. And so that's what bought the family to Israel. If you think about it, during that time, Israel was a new country, it was Palestine back in the day. And having had a bit of wealth in Europe, my father was educated in a boarding school in the UK. So, he wanted me and my brothers to get a similar education. We moved to England when I was 11. I'm 41 now and London's home, it's the lion's share. My father passed away a couple years ago, but I look back and remember his approach to tobacco... My approach to coffee is very similar because it's about the ingredient; and it's about a crop; and it's about how it's processed; and it's about getting a product to consumers; and every single step along the way. It might be a different product, but the methodology and thinking, and the wish for excellence, is the same.

**TM: The qualities your father had, have they inspired you in your own approach to work?**

**AG:** I admired my dad. He was a good man, an honest and straight-forward, hardworking person. He cared about people. He loved what he was doing. I guess you get influenced by people who are our nearest and dearest. So, absolutely, my father had a good influence on me, and I admire those qualities that I see in myself that came from him. I remember, when I was a kid, seeing him take tobacco leaves, chewing them and spitting them out; that's how he was tasting the quality. And now I do the same, in-

teracting with the farmers, eating coffee beans, it's very similar.

**TM: I was also always a tea person; born in Mauritius and having had links to India from my grandfather who was one of the Viceroys. I knew everything about tea but nothing about coffee. How is the quality of coffee established?**

**AG:** Coffee has two grades of quality—the speciality grade and the commercial grade, that's all there is, anything beyond that, words like premium or luxury and that kind of stuff is all marketing fluff. Coffee is graded professionally by people called Q Graders—quality graders. Q Graders need to pass the Coffee Quality Institute's Q Graders Exam—either in Arabica or Robusta. It takes about three years to pass.

Q Graders score coffee on a 100 points system, like wine. And any coffee that gets 80 points and over is deemed of speciality grade according to the Specialty Coffee Association, which is a worldwide organisation. Coffee grading is visual and sensory. It starts with getting the green beans and testing their levels of moisture; if they are outside a certain range the beans get discredited, you send them back, you don't buy them. It's very important that the beans have the right level of moisture. Then you get a sample of a few hundred beans and look at them literally one by one to find what we call 'primary defects'. There are 'secondary defects' too, but I'll just focus on the primary ones. These defects could be a result of a poorly processed bean, or a poorly grown bean, a bean that's been affected by insect damage, over-ripe, under-ripe. All these defects would cause the coffee to taste bad. If you can spot a single defective bean, the entire lot will not pass as speciality grade. It's very strict. This is why in the top farms the beans get hand sorted and processed.

**TM: It sounds like a complicated job.**

**AG:** It doesn't stop there. Once you've passed the visual examination, you roast the beans and do a process called 'cupping'. Cupping is really the sensory process of tasting and attributing scores for characteristics such as aromatics, flavours, after taste, acidity, body, balance, cleanliness of cup, and consistency between, say, five cups.

Speciality is only for Arabica, so when you talk about our coffee, it's 100% Arabica beans of speciality grade. There's another category called 'Fine Robusta' and the reason it is 'fine' and not 'speciality' is because Robusta is an inferior bean. It has much more caffeine, which is there to protect it against disease and animal infestation because it grows in lower altitudes which have more animals. But, they also have less acidity and less sweetness, and they don't taste as good. There's a joke in the industry, we say: They're so bitter, even the bugs don't want to eat them! But they account for only about 30% of the world supply of coffee, and 70% of the world's crop is Arabica. So, when people say to me, "Oh, we

only buy 100% Arabica beans." It means nothing. Now, do you actually use Arabica beans of specialty grade, or do you use ones which are full of defects? So, these are all measures of grading coffee, and this is part of what separates us from the rest.

**TM: I know you well enough to know that you're a private person, close to your immediate and extended families. But now, four years on from when you began this project, you're travelling all over the place giving talks, doing tastings, entertaining high profile clients. You're expected to be in the limelight. How are you managing being a front-of-house person?**

**AG:** I've never done anything for fame. I'm not interested. But I'm not shying away from it, either. I don't hide from giving interviews and meeting people, in fact, I enjoy it. What I see myself doing is not talking about myself. I'm talking about the coffee estates. A lot of people consider themselves connoisseurs and they can't operate without coffee, yet so many people know nothing about coffee grades. I also find it remarkable that most coffee lovers have never tasted the world's best coffees. Most never will. They're too rare. The speciality movement is relatively new, a lot's been happening in the last twenty years. The leading country in the world for specialty coffee is, I think, Australia. You get a lot of great coffees in Japan, not so much the amount but the quality because they're prepared to pay a lot for it. Nordic countries too, a little bit in the States, and now I'm trying to grow that in Europe.

**TM: Where do you see your company in 10 years' time? Do you have a game plan?**

**AG:** It's completely organic. The move to compostable capsules is something we're looking at. We're hoping for a manufacturer of capsule bases coming to us and saying, "Okay, we've managed to produce a compostable capsule base which can be hermetically sealed." The issue is, how do you get the capsule to be compostable on the one hand, and air tight on the other? If it's porous the coffee would oxidise and lose its flavour. At the moment none of the compostable capsules on the market allow for them to be hermetically sealed. I'd like to move into compostable capsule bases for two reasons. First, because of course it is better for the environment, but, as well, if you think about it, we all recycle now, right? And, wouldn't it make a lot more sense to take the capsules and just throw them in the compost bin? You'd make life so much easier... Apart from that, there's no game plan, but there is a vision, a goal. And the goal is, until every single Michelin-graded restaurant, until every five star hotel, until I meet the person that is discerning enough to say, "You know what, I care about my ingredients, let's buy specialty grade coffee," there's no need for me to rest. There's always something to grow.

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