

You're a *what?*



Roastmaster

Kathleen
Green

Kathleen Green is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She can be reached at (202) 691-5717 or at green.kathleen@bls.gov.

Mick Carnett never meant to get into the business of roasting coffee. He merely wanted a decent cup of coffee when he moved to Columbia, South Carolina, 15 years ago. When he couldn't find one, he started roasting coffee beans in his garage.

It wasn't long before Mick's coffee attracted friends asking to buy his home-roasted beans. What began as a small effort quickly expanded into a small business that now includes two roasting machines. "It started from desperation, then spread by word of mouth," he says. "It was about filling a demand."

There is wide variation in how roastmasters identify themselves. As a self-employed "microroaster," for example, Mick does more than roast small batches of coffee beans. "I'm also the CEO and janitor," he says, "and I have to sell what I make at some point." But all roastmasters likely share a passion for coffee.

What they do

Unroasted coffee "beans," which are actually green seeds of the berry that grows on coffee

plants, are bitter and acidic. Roastmasters make green coffee palatable for drinking by overseeing the roasting process.

Choosing beans. Often, roastmasters' first task is to decide where their coffee beans will come from. To ensure that the beans he buys meet his standards, Mick works primarily with two importers that have direct knowledge of the beans' origins. "It's known as 'relationship' coffee," Mick says. "The broker has a relationship with the farmer and knows about the locale it comes from and the farm where it's grown."

Roasting process. Roastmasters control the degree of roast, from light to dark, of green coffee beans. Heat causes beans to become drier, lighter in weight, and darker in color; to crack and expand; and to change in flavor, as natural sugars in the beans caramelize during roasting.

Most roastmasters use programmable roasting machines for consistent results. The roastmaster loads beans into a hopper, which stores the beans above a roasting drum. Then, the roastmaster releases the beans down a chute and into the large drum, where the

beans are circulated as they roast. “Ultimately, roasting coffee is not much different than popping popcorn,” says Mick, “but with a much more sophisticated popper.”

In large operations, a conveyor system may load green coffee into machines that roast up to 11,000 pounds per hour; the roasted beans are packaged by an automated production line. Roastmasters in these companies oversee the mechanized process but may not be directly involved with individual batches.

Microroasters, like Mick, specialize in smaller batches: the capacity of Mick's two machines combined is less than 50 pounds. These roastmasters load green coffee into the hopper themselves, and they unload and package the roasted beans by hand.

Other duties. As with most manufacturing industries, the smaller a coffee roasting organization is, the less likely its operations are to be automated and the more varied roastmasters' job tasks are.

For example, self-employed roastmasters may have other duties related to running a

business, such as marketing, filling orders, paying bills, and updating the website. “All businesses, no matter what they do, have some tasks in common,” says Mick. “It just happens that what I do inside the big room is roast and package coffee.”

How they prepare

Roastmasters often start out as hobbyists before deciding to make a go of it professionally. Mick recommends that coffee enthusiasts try roasting at home and attend coffee festivals and trade shows to test equipment from different manufacturers. Working for a roastmaster, especially one who is willing to mentor, is another way to learn.

Knowledge and skills. There are no formal requirements for becoming a roastmaster, but getting hands-on experience is crucial. Roastmasters often use technology—such as digital tools that record temperature and air velocity inside the roasting chamber—to help monitor each batch.

Roastmaster Mick Carnett checks the roasting drum as it circulates a small batch of coffee beans.



Photo of Mick Carnett by Rock Star Dad.

“The smell of fresh-roasted coffee permeates my workplace,” says Mick. “I have the best-smelling job around.”



But experienced microroasters may rely less on technical feedback and more on their own sensory information. “I’m still listening, smelling, and watching,” says Mick. “But after 10 years, I pretty much know how a batch is going to turn out.”

Roastmasters who want to open their own business need other expertise. For example, Mick uses math knowledge to calculate expenses; repair skills to keep equipment running; and communication ability for advertising, customer service, and outreach. “You have to have basic business common sense,” he says, “coupled with real-world experience.”

Training. Information and training also help prospective roastmasters prepare. Tutorial videos and guides are available online, and public libraries may have resources about coffee roasting. Many roasting machine manufacturers offer training on how to use their equipment.

Optional certificate programs, training, and information are available from trade associations. For example, the Roasters Guild has programs for two different certificate levels; courses include green coffee grading, basic roast profiles, and packaging. And the Specialty Coffee Association of America offers workshops, seminars, and other training opportunities.

What it's like

For coffee lovers, becoming a roastmaster might seem like a dream job. But, like most jobs, roastmaster work isn't always ideal.

Employment and wages. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not collect employment and wage data specifically on roastmasters. Instead, BLS surveys count coffee roasters among food and tobacco roasting, baking, and drying machine operators and tenders.

BLS data show that there were 18,750 of these workers in May 2013 with a median hourly wage of \$13.37—about \$27,800 annually, less than the \$35,080 median for all workers. Those data are for wage and salary workers only and do not include the self-employed.

Work environment. In large manufacturing facilities, roastmasters must keep up with production timelines while maintaining quality. They typically spend much of the day on their feet, tending noisy machinery. Even in a small business, machinery can be troublesome: for Mick, repair and maintenance are what he likes least about his work.

But Mick likes being his own boss. He especially enjoys sharing his enthusiasm for microroasting with the community, including helping organizations to raise money selling custom-labeled coffee that he roasts for them—a fundraising option he calls “coffee for a cause.”

Still, Mick's favorite part of the job might just be the aroma. “The smell of fresh-roasted coffee permeates my workplace, from early in the morning until the end of the day,” he says. “I try not to take for granted that I have the best-smelling job around.”

