

VANCOUVER, B.C.

BY KENNETH R. OLSON

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EAST COAST BGA CAMP, VIRGINIA

FIELD REPORT



PHOTOS BY OSLERZOO PHOTOGRAPHY

A love of coffee, craft beer and local foods aren't the only characteristics the cities of the Pacific Northwest share, of course. But those things combined with a rainy day or two in the midst of June, fairly accurately sums up the interchangeable city description that could be Seattle, Portland or Vancouver, B.C., all of which form the foundation of Cascadia, a region stretching along the Pacific Rim, from the Oregon border in the south, north up to British Columbia. And while April brought a slew of coffee folks to the southernmost city in that chain, Portland, for Barista Nation and the Specialty Coffee Association of America's Conference and Expo, June took them to the northernmost: Vancouver.

Huge, snowcapped peaks rise up to the east and form a ring nearly encompassing British Columbia's largest city, Vancouver, while the salt-water swirl of the Strait of Georgia, the mishmash of Gulf Islands and the rugged spine of Vancouver Island fill the horizon to the west. Magnificent natural beauty surrounds the city, and when the sun breaks out, as in so much of the Pacific Northwest, the stunning views send jaws dropping. The trick is finding that slice of sun.

Just after the official start of summer in the Northern Hemisphere, gray clouds and rain descended on Vancouver, but they brought along with them a couple of fun coffee events. Perhaps in an attempt to keep an appropriate atmosphere for the second installment of Barista Nation Canada and the first Caffeine Crawl through Vancouver, Mother Nature kept the temperatures cool and the skies overcast, occasionally showering the city in a rainy sheen, practically begging the denizens to have another cup, linger over a special coffee, and just soak in the experience.

Salt Spring Coffee hosted the first Barista Nation Canada presented by the espresso machine company UNIC last September, and it was such a success, they couldn't wait for another go 'round. And just like the previous incarnation, the days' open slots for local baristas filled up fast.

Presented with a wide variety of classes and education tracks, baristas

were free to pick from three different sessions per time period on topics that piqued their interest. Industry experts presented classes on cupping seasonals, cold brewing methods, sustainable business practices, incorporating social media into small businesses, creating custom cold drinks, and many more. Mike Strumpf from nearby Swiss Water, for example, spoke about the decaffeination process, while Sterling Houghton from Primo Passo Coffee Co. in Santa Monica, Calif., gave a talk on modifying café menus to match seasonal ingredients.

Barista Nation's structured activities wrapped up with a seasonal drink team challenge, a la *Top Chef*, where contestants, after being randomly divided into teams, had to create a refreshing drink that they could sell in their cafés from a range of ingredients including summer fruit, fresh herbs and tea, espresso, or iced coffees. The winning team members took home bragging rights and of course a coffee-themed gift bag made from actual coffee bags, naturally.

The day ended as probably nearly every social event in B.C. is required to, with a cedar-plank salmon barbeque, a keg of local craft beer, some custom-made Okanagan Valley wines, and long tables of happy and enthusiastic baristas engaging in lively conversations. And that led directly to the next event of the two-day coffee extravaganza: Saturday's Caffeine Crawl.

The Crawl actually started at the Salt Spring roastery on Friday night after the Barista Nation barbeque as the party switched, again as these things seem destined to, and morphed into a latte art throwdown and raffle with a buy-in raising money for the nonprofit organization CARE. Top prizes included a Baratza Vario grinder and a UNIC home espresso machine.

Saturday morning began with a well-timed break in the early-summer downpour that closed out Friday. Temperatures rose into the mid-60s, the rain abated and a few rays of sunshine lit up the sidewalks. In short, a solid start for the first West Coast installment of Caffeine Crawl.

Caffeine Crawls are the brainchild of Jason Burton of the Lab in Kansas City, Mo., which take industry professionals and coffee enthusiasts to a number of cafés, coffee companies and related shops in a given city. Previous events have been held in Denver, Colo., and Kansas City. At each business, Crawlers have a chance to sample coffees, hear about what makes each place unique and socialize with their fellow coffee geeks. The Vancouver Caffeine Crawl was the first one where the Crawlers were free to travel on their own to the different participating shops around the city, so that they could go to the cafés in any order. Thus, running into other random Crawlers across town was a given. Previous versions of the Crawls have used buses or had all the shops near one street or section of town.

The Vancouver Crawl began at the Main Street café of Salt Spring Coffee, where the always friendly Stamatis Papadopoulos, a barista trainer for the company, was excited to meet people, tell them a little about the history of Salt Spring Coffee, show off some of the company's newest lots, and then entice them to try a signature drink: a spiced

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orange mocha developed by the café's baristas specifically for the Crawl.

Sitting at a table, examining a map and enjoying their coffees were Yvonne Fong and Eric Beland of Vancouver. Both are coffee enthusiasts who discovered the Caffeine Crawl on Facebook and decided to sign up. "We're just getting into coffee," explained Yvonne, noting that she'd recently bought a Chemex. "We've been to some of the shops (on the Crawl)," she said, "And some we haven't." The Crawl was a good way, they decided, to discover more about the specialty coffee scene in Vancouver. Five cafés and a chocolatier were on the day's agenda including Salt Spring, Momento Coffee House, Salty Tongue Café, Caffé Artigiano, and Prado Café.

Vancouver, however, like the other cities of the Pacific Northwest, is absolutely bursting with interesting, new cafés, and since Crawlers were free to explore the city in the order they saw fit, it was easy to drop in at other shops along the way. One of the cafés that drew the most attention was the recently opened 49th Parallel shop on 13th and Main just a short walk down bustling Main Street from the Salt Spring location. A brand-new space incorporating eye-popping design, a lot of reclaimed wood, a fireplace, and an integrated donut bakery, the 49th Parallel café this day boasted former Canadian barista champion Kyle Straw working the pour-over bar, Vince Piccolo at the striking Spirit espresso machine, and longtime World Barista Championship (WBC) judge Hugo Neuproler at the cash register. It was kind of like walking into a WBC café.

I was overcome by a similar sensation when we visited the cozy Prado Café and found owner and multi-time national champion barista Sammy Piccolo behind the machine, his wife and seasoned WBC judge Andrea Piccolo manning the register, and a live feed of the Euro 2012 soccer tournament playing above the bar.

Along the way to Prado, a short detour brought up another new café and roastery, Matchstick Coffee. A simple, uncluttered space, with a heavy vault door along the back wall (a remnant from the building's former days as a bank), Matchstick had the feeling of a Nordic café with emphasis on natural materials, clean lines and smooth workflow from the counter to the rear of the shop where the roaster stands in an out-of-the-way spot.



After hosting the first Vancouver Barista Nation last fall, Salt Spring Coffee couldn't wait to take the reins again for another event. This one brought even more local baristas and café owners together to play with coffee, cup with expert importers, build community, and learn from one another.



As is the Barista Nation tradition, the daylong event ended with a friendly competition: for this event, the task was for teams to devise a summer drink for a café menu. The winning team, pictured here, took home coffee-themed gift bags made from actual coffee bags, not to mention bragging rights.

One of the most enthusiastic welcomes we received along the Crawl came from Rick Martin, co-owner of Momento Coffee House. Rick's a big guy, with a bigger heart and smile, and his genuine excitement about sharing his coffee was obvious from the moment he met us curbside. A smallish café tucked into a long, slender space, Momento is known around town for its siphon bar. But for the Crawl, Rick created a special pour-over using his own technique, and one that he said required breaking a few rules, such as pouring down the side of the filter. But the truth is in the cup, and the personalized Salt Spring Coffee from Nicaragua he prepared positively sang with bright citrus notes and a super-smooth body.

Ultimately, the Caffeine Crawl, while a lot of fun, only revealed a slice of the ever-growing Vancouver coffee scene. But that's kind of the point. Burton's Caffeine Crawl events get people out there, luring them to shops and cafés they may have just heard of or passed by, expanding their coffee horizons, and really helping to build the community by bringing together professionals and amateurs, united by their love of coffee.

If you have a chance to visit Vancouver, you'll find a beautiful and charming city, reliably voted one of the best places to live in the world, with numerous, fantastic options for locally crafted and sourced food and beverage, and friendly people. And if it's raining when you go, well, that's just part of the atmosphere, so do as the locals do: grab a cup, sit back, relax, enjoy your drink, and stay awhile. **b**



PHOTOS BY KENNETH R. OLSON

The coffee fun wasn't over when Barista Nation ended, however. We spent the following day cruising through Vancouver on the Caffeine Crawl, which is an event organized by Jason Burton (pictured bottom far left), to showcase top cafés in cities throughout North America. Our stops included 49th Parallel's new café, where green buyer, Mie Hansen, worked the brew bar alongside 2011 Canadian Barista Champ, Kyle Straw.

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