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Coming of age

Emma McDougall uncovers the rise of the New Zealand Barista Championship and its impact on the specialty coffee industry over the past 20 years. Part three.

In final article of this series, we navigate the growth of technology and tools with equipment, particularly the grinder, and how this change impacted the number of competitors on stage.

The start of the 2010s saw solid representation and high rankings of Kiwis on the world stage. The almost rhythmical baton of the same winning names during the early years of the competition passed and we started to see a variety of different faces take the crown. An impressive fifth place in Melbourne in 2013 from Nick Clark of Flight Coffee saw NZ back in the podium rankings.

A critical turning point in 2013 WBC was the introduction and subsequent rise of the EK43 grinder. This old school deli grinder brought a raft of changes through the technical component and the way competitors looked to grind their coffee in competition. Distribution apparatus and tamping systems became a focus for the baristas. Experimental changes at the processing level of green coffee brought a new era of flavour, pushing the flavour profiles of what coffee could be.

In NZ, we saw significant shifts from the motivation of individual baristas. It was noticed that roasters had previously pushed their baristas at the competition with limited experience of the rules and format. More baristas were heading to origin. The telling of the story of the coffee from seed to cup was intense and genuine.

The time and commitment of many judges and volunteers running three regionals and then national event, and the logistics that come with them, was being stretched. The Association decided to consolidate the event into a three-day barista event, eventually incorporating a 12-person semi-final and final on the same



Luise Metelka is the 2021 New Zealand Barista Champion.

day. Later on, this semi-final was dropped due to reduced numbers.

After 2016, we saw a dip in the number of competitors. Did the level get too high? Too expensive? Too sophisticated? Too many rock stars? Did a barista have to go to the farm and process the beans themselves to compete? In 2017, 40 per cent of competitors were roasters in their day-to-day working life. Where had all the baristas gone? In 2018, the lowest number of entries ever had nine competitors take the stage. Running the competition in future years was questioned. With John Gordon placing sixth at the World Barista Championship that April, it was shown that New Zealand could still hold its own. But something radical was still needed to entice baristas back to showcase their passions on stage.

The genius idea of creating a 'Best Newcomer' cash prize of \$2000 was floated. Other prizes including 'People's Choice' where the café customers could vote for their favourite barista competitor. This created a buzz online unseen before. We had over a thousand unique votes with reasons why their barista was the best. The sincere comments were endearing, creating that connection between baristas

and their customers. Most "Outstanding milk beverage" with a sweet \$500 cash and trophy also enticed baristas seeking that harmonious balance with milk and coffee in the cup. With a sold-out field of 22 baristas taking the stage in 2019, fresh branding, and a great venue, the Championship had reached a balance again.

As for 2020, the event was postponed three weeks before it was due to happen, twice. Then in March 2021, with emotions peaking, we were finally able to hold our 19th Barista Championship, and everybody used their own EK43 grinder.

While NZ hasn't taken the number one spot (yet), we still punch above our weight in the narrative of celebrating and telling the story of the tasty brown stuff. With swift adaptation of rules, equipment, people development, and coffee exploration at farm level, we are onto a winner. Our champion for 2021, Luise Metelka, weaved a story of superheroes, from the changes in growing and processing at farm level (complete with Dolly Parton soundtrack) after her incredible trip to Colombia.

Over the last 20 years, the growth of NZ Barista Championship has been exponential. We can only imagine what the next 20 will bring. The future is bright and balanced.

The Meadow Fresh NZ Barista Championship 2022 will take place from 12 to 13 March 2022 at Expressions Arts and Entertainment Centre in Upper Hutt, Wellington. **■**



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