

Espresso Syndicate has made sustainability a priority in its business operations.

TBC

Going the extra green mile

Espresso Syndicate is a small coffee business that oozes sustainability. From the coffee they source to the packaging they use, this roaster is determined to leave no stone unturned.

When Melissa Floreani says her business is sustainable, she means it. “It’s a principle that really goes through our whole business. It’s not just about the type of coffee we purchase but the warehouse environment as well,” she says.

Located in Melbourne’s south-east, Espresso Syndicate is made with a consideration of sustainability. The doors are reused, the office space is made with recycled timber furnishings and eco-ply, and the walls are painted with low Volatile Organic Compounds.

From day one, when Melissa and environmentalist partner Ben Spruzen started Espresso Syndicate in 2009, they always had in mind the sustainable impact they wanted to achieve as a company.

“My understanding of being sustainable in the coffee industry was to be much more in depth than simply buying organic or

Fair Trade coffee,” says Melissa. “There are lots of things you have to do behind the scenes as well to create a truly sustainable business, such as sourcing biodegradable cups, lids and packaging material.”

Although Melissa says Espresso Syndicate is continually developing its concept of sustainability, one thing that remains constant is sourcing direct trade coffee.

“We need to be sure that the farms we’re buying coffee from will be around in 10 years time. Often, when people are buying coffee, they’ll see a certification, but it won’t tell them anything about the farming environment,” says Melissa. “Part of the way sustainability is growing for us in the green bean sector, is that farms are becoming more transparent. It’s easier for us to deal directly with the growers, talk to them about their business models and help them by paying good prices to develop their product.”

This way, Melissa says the producers

not only establish themselves as a quality source, but will continue to have high sales, which will ensure they are around for the next five years.

“In one way we’re guaranteeing supply, which is something you can’t always do,” Melissa says. “Yes, some of the yields might be lower with some of these [less sustainable] practices, but it stops oversupply and the quality we see in our coffee from direct trade is much higher. It’s a fantastic step in the right direction.”

With the assistance of external bodies and green bean traders, Espresso Syndicate works together with key international organisations to learn more about the individual farms they source their coffee from.

Melissa says this level of communication ensures the sustainable practices, which they so value, are actually happening at ground level. The external bodies work with farmers on their farming practices to make sure no chemicals are used, that



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they are responsible to co-workers, and show concern and responsibility for the environment.

"We need to engage those different groups to gather all the information we require to maintain a sustainable relationship and product for our customers," says Melissa. "It's definitely a different way of operating rather than farms sending their coffee to a bigger supplier, getting a very low price, then going through various channels because it gets to us. In some ways [direct trade] is a

way of life."

Felipe's family has been producing coffee since the 1850s. When his parents took over the farm in 2001 from his grandfather, with it they installed a new, alternative method of agriculture.

"They made a mission for the farm to be an example of sustainable agriculture – environmentally, socially and economically," he says. "Today we work with over 40 neighbour farms, improving quality and working on becoming more sustainable by rejuvenating soils, fencing-

control the marketing of our coffee is through who represents and serves it."

Melissa says a trip to Brazil, Guatemala and Indonesia in 2013 will allow Espresso Syndicate to connect with coffee farmers at origin and see for themselves whether the farms they source their coffee from fit into their sustainable model.

To date, 50 per cent of Espresso Syndicate's coffees are sourced through direct trade relationships. The remainder is a combination of Fair Trade, Organic and Rainforest Alliance Certified coffees.

As well as supporting farmers at origin, Melissa says it's important for her business to support local origins such as Sumatra and Papua New Guinea, used in their Syndicate blend.

"We've always believed those origins are important to support for their good coffee

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more advanced approach to sustainability. You can't get a high quality of coffee unless you're going about it in the right way."

Demonstrating the value in direct relationships, Melissa met with Brazilian farmer Felipe Croce in 2012, who supplies Espresso Syndicate with beans from his farm Fazenda Ambiental Fortaleza, which translates into Environmental Fortress Farm.

"The reason for my trip was to gain an insight of how coffee was portrayed in Australia. Melbourne is definitely one of the most progressive and unique coffee cultures I have seen around the world," says Felipe. "The level of involvement in the community is more than a drink but a

off natural springs, reducing harmful agro-toxics and helping them make more money from their coffee."

Felipe says maintaining close relationships with buyers like Espresso Syndicate are all part of his parent's mission to develop a sustainable product.

"The specialty coffee industry is going through a wonderful revolution, which is bringing the roasters, farmers, baristas, and consumers closer together. The flagships of this revolution have been quality, traceability, and socially and environmentally-correct projects," says Felipe. "For us, it is clear that the harvest is not finished until the last drop is consumed in the cup. One of the best ways we can

and local reach, as opposed to other [South and Central] American coffees which demand expensive and long transportation," she says.

Sourcing sustainable coffee is one thing, but as Melissa contests, it's means little if a company doesn't go all the way to ensure a sustainable product from start to finish. "One of the key things for us back in the planning stages in 2009 was to move away from the standard packaging for coffee that typically uses foil, plastic and polyethylene," says Melissa. "At the time the alternatives were paper, which didn't have protective barriers for keeping coffee fresh."

Espresso Syndicate eventually found Convex Plastics in New Zealand, who produce what's thought to be the world's first high barrier biodegradable film, the Econic. These coffee bags contain three separate biodegradable barrier films and an optional biodegradable vent to release Co2 gases from freshly roasted beans.

"If you're a roaster buying amazing coffees, you should want your coffee to taste the best it can, that's why our packaging is lightweight to reduce transport costs, takes less heat to seal and doesn't have the odours of nasty plastics," says Melissa.

She says Espresso Syndicate was the first company in Australia to use the Econic bag, which is also used for their Clark St Roaster label.

"For me, being sustainable is about making the best choice, the better choice. If you have an opportunity to choose a product that has less of a negative impact on the environment, whether it has upstream or downstream benefits, then that's the choice you need to make," says Melissa. "It's just about broadening your options and carefully thinking about the products you choose."

Espresso Syndicate was a finalist in the 2011 Premier's Sustainability Awards for small businesses, recognised for its commitment to sustainable farming practices and environmental responsibility. Not only is Espresso Syndicate cautious of its every-day choices, but increasingly Melissa says her customers are as well.

"We have to be a model for our customers and show them that we only use selected products because they are great quality options," she says. "I think small businesses are driving a lot of change towards sustainability, and people are responding to it. It's good to influence people in terms of things like coffee packaging, cups and lids, because in the end our customers are the ones who make decisions about sustainability, not just large, powerful companies."

A 30-kilogram Brambati roaster stands tall in the back of Espresso Syndicate's roastery. The roaster uses green power, gas for heating and an after-burner to minimise gas emissions. With global warming such a paramount problem, Melissa says factoring sustainable practice into a business growth strategy is a must.

"Coffee roasters need to be market leaders. If you're a coffee company

or a roaster who supplies a large number of cafés, you have to be responsible about the coffee you're buying and the packaging you use for your coffee," Melissa says. "We have a responsibility to educate cafés and their customers. It's a decision we've made for a long time now. It's possible, and it's becoming more possible and less expensive to make these choices."

Melissa says she's often surprised when customers comment on how dedicated the business is to sustainability.

"We just think everyone is this sustainable. It doesn't occur to us that many people are still not as educated or pro-active about it as we are," she says. "But it's so worth the effort. Eventually it just becomes part of what you do, and in some ways it simplifies the way you live."



The Fazenda Ambiental Fortaleza farm in Brazil has been producing coffee since the 1850s.

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