

Coffee merchant calls consumption top priority

Not many coffee traders can look back on a 60-year relationship with growers in a single origin, or on more than 80 years trading as coffee merchants and dealers, but this is the case with Complete Coffee Ltd in London

Complete Coffee also works with charities in producing countries such as La Rayuela in Colombia, shown here



Breminer need for a more diverse producing structure

Complete Coffee's origins date back to 1919, when Alan Ridge founded Alan J Ridge & Co Ltd in London. In 1938 Ernest Breminer arrived from Prague and continued working as a coffee agent in London by setting up Ernest A Breminer Ltd, acquiring Alan J Ridge two years later.

The two companies traded side by side until 1988 until they merged as Alan J Ridge & Breminer Ltd, celebrating 80 years of service to the coffee industry, where after, in 2001, Complete Coffee Limited was formed, with two trading divisions, Ridge & Breminer and Priory Tea & Coffee. Nowadays, the company trades with all of the leading origins, including Brazil, Colombia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Central America, but looking at the issues and challenges facing the industry in which it operates, Managing Director Ian Breminer believes that consumption remains the key.

"How to grow consumption in mature markets is central to the future of the industry," Mr Breminer told *C&CI*. "Consumption may be rising in new markets but, overall, consumption in mature markets has been in a spiral of decline for some time. Coffee shops have done a good job of attracting new consumers to coffee, as have new types of drinks that are popular with younger consumers, but the problem is that many of these drinks do not actually require much coffee to make them. I think that much promotion and advertising of coffee has become rather tired, and that the big roasters need to find ways to innovate and to get the story across to consumers. We need to make coffee into an exciting story – whether this might be Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, or other specialties."

Specialty coffee is a subject dear to Mr Breminer's heart having been heavily involved in the formation of the Specialty Coffee Association of Europe (SCAE), but issues such as traceability, prices, and continued concentration of production in the big three producing countries are all issues which preoccupy him currently.

"Traceability is very much an issue," he told *C&CI*, "particularly with the private label business, but price remains the key to everything." Having recently been updated on, and involved

in, the ongoing development of the Common Code for the Coffee Community or '4Cs' initiative, Mr Breminer said he believed much progress had been made on refining the Code and addressing concerns raised by producing countries, but as he noted, "in the event of another crash, would it help producers at all?"

"There is no doubt that the 4Cs has come a long way in the last six months," Mr Breminer explained. "There is a very strong measure of agreement now on the way forward, and I expect that further news of the progress that has been made will be forthcoming shortly."

Another concern felt at Complete Coffee – one also highlighted elsewhere in this issue – is the continuing concentration of supply in a few important producing countries.

"I think it is understood in Colombia that it makes no sense to plant more and more coffee. There the industry is looking at specialisation and at the specialty market as the way forward, but I don't think there is any doubt that Brazil will simply grow more and more coffee," Mr Breminer said.

"We need a more diverse producing structure, and one that allows origins in Africa and Central America to thrive. Frost in Brazil is not such an issue as it once was but, with weather patterns changing due to global warming, as an industry we need to think about what might happen if a combination of drought in one country and severe weather in another occurred in the same crop year. Such events could cause immense disturbance in the market, just as a return to over-production could bring about immense hardship for producers in several countries."

One way Mr Breminer believes that such a situation might be avoided – and consumption in mature markets addressed at the same time – is to enhance awareness of origins among consumers. Simple things like having a coffee of the month in a coffee shop can encourage consumers to shop more widely when they visit their local super market, he believes, but for them to be able to discover new coffees and for consumers to be drawn to drinking more coffee, a diversity of origins is essential. **CCI**