



Kiwi Coffee

Emma Markland-Webster is moving on from Atomic Coffee, but will continue embracing the coffee community she's helped develop in New Zealand for a decade and a half.

It's hard to believe that at any point in her life Atomic Coffee's Emma Markland-Webster didn't like coffee.

Since moving to New Zealand from the UK, Emma has become one of the nation's most notorious coffee enthusiasts, as the country's first official representative at the World Barista Championship in 2002, and a founding member of the New Zealand Coffee Roasters industry body. She's been a judge at every World Barista Championship since she first competed, and runs New Zealand's national competitions, helping bring them in line with international rules around four years ago.

Around 19 years ago, however, Emma admits she didn't even like the taste of coffee, and certainly knew nothing about making it. While she was working as a chef at a restaurant in the Lake District in Cumbria, UK she finally tried filtered drip – a moment that would see her working life take an entirely new direction as she became entranced with the world of coffee.

"I had a few pots in the afternoon and soon I was hooked," she recounts. "I wondered what was wrong with me to have not had it for so long... It was a whole new world for me."

At the time there wasn't really any espresso in the UK; Emma remembers the choice of coffee was cappuccino or black. She discovered espresso when she moved to New Zealand while working at a delicatessen, managing the cheese and coffee areas.

From there, Emma grew increasingly interested in coffee making techniques, and even started teaching classes four nights a week. When she heard of a coffee making competition, she figured she had enough experience to try it out. She took the top spot nationally in 2002, going on as the first official representative for New Zealand at the international level.

When asked what the international competition scene was like back then Emma chuckles, recalling the minimal backing competitors like her received.

"I was team New Zealand, it was a team of one: Emma," she says. "I went in thinking that to be in the top 10 would be cool, and then I came in second going into the finals. I was hooked from then on in."

"You can really get too comfortable in your own zone," she says. "Competitions spur me to do more, to learn more."

In addition to touring the international circuit for almost a decade, Emma has been paramount in bringing New Zealand's competitions up to international standards. When she first competed, she notes she didn't have much of a reference for what would take place at the worlds, which worked fine because few other competitors did. These days, however, with webcasts and increased sharing of information, she notes that she's astounded by the knowledge and high-level calibre of competing baristas. With this knowledge in mind, she's ensuring that New Zealand's competitions match up to the same standards of the

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While her personal competition days are over, Emma hasn't missed a world competition since that first one, having judged at every World Barista Competition for the last nine years. She notes that competitions encourage her to keep learning, to push herself to continually improve her skills.

World Barista Championships. Four years ago she was instrumental in bringing the competition format in line with that of the global one.

"At the world's there's such an astounding level of baristas' knowledge of origins, everything they know about coffee," she notes. "Even look at the

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level of talent coming from producing countries – it’s outstanding. It used to be all about the Nordic nations, now it’s really anyone’s game.”

While keeping her toe dipped in the world of competitions as a volunteer, Emma has worked with Atomic Coffee for around 11 years, part-time for a while and for the last five years as their full-time National Training & Standards Manager. Last April, however, was her last month with the company as she leaves them to start up her own coffee consultancy and training service, Monster Trucks Coffee.

While Emma says that the change to working for herself is to spend more time at home with her husband and cats, she also admits that she’s looking forward to having even more time to travel for international coffee events.

“I’m hoping to do less work, but also concentrate on really cool projects, essentially doing what I love to do all of the time,” she says. “I would like the freedom to go overseas when I want to, so often I’m tied up in the workplace.”

Another encouraging factor behind Emma’s shift towards New Zealand’s coffee community at large has been the aftermath of the earthquake that hit Christchurch on 22 February.

“It was a big blow, we heard the news and it was pretty full on,” says Emma.

“It’s one of those moments everyone will remember... for the coffee industry, a lot of coffee roasters lost their ability to roast and their client base. But there was also this great sense of community that came out of it. Companies were supplying other roasters accounts without any commercial benefit. It was this incredible sense of unification, with everyone helping out.”

The Christchurch regional heats had been scheduled to take place at C4 Coffee, but with the earthquake devastating the roastery, the competition had to be moved to Wellington.

Emma expected around 20 baristas to participate, but only seven made it to Wellington. Compared to the usual competitive environment, Emma notes the group of baristas from the earthquake affected area really banded together. “They were a team, like team Christchurch, for a competition it was a little weird,” she notes.

Opening her own consultancy business seems a natural progression for Emma, who has spent much of her personal time helping the New Zealand coffee scene progress. An major contribution Emma has put forward in her career was helping to establish the New Zealand Coffee Roaster(s) Association in 2005.

“Our main goal was to increase the awareness of New Zealand roasted coffee,” Emma explains. “A number of years before the group was founded, we were trying to form a group. Originally it was about getting a logo to increase consumer awareness.”

While lots of coffee was coming from Australia at the time, Emma and other roasters were looking for a way to highlight coffee from their home turf. In establishing a group, they were able to come up with a brand name that really helped move forward their educating efforts.

“But it’s become about so much more,” Emma explains. “It’s now about educating the consumer about not just New Zealand roasted coffee but freshly roasted coffee in general.”

Emma’s personal goal now when it comes to educating consumers, however, is to help consumers in New Zealand move past their strong espresso culture, and open themselves to softer brewing methods. With so many great quality single origins and Cup of Excellence coffees being introduced, Emma is a strong advocate of using brewing methods such as Chemex to better appreciate these beans.

“Filters are really seen as being quite old school, so 1980s,” says Emma. “But brewing methods can really open the palette to enjoy these interesting coffees.”

Getting consumers into brewing methods is easier said than done, however, and to get drinkers to



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experiment Emma suggests a soft approach: “The trick is not forcing it, just let people find it out for themselves,” she says. “What I do is during any barista training, I just throw [brewing methods] out there. I usually get a double take from café owners: ‘But I just spent all this money on this espresso machine!’”

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