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Iron & Steel Preservation

March 04, 2015



Craftsman's brew



Christine, Barista



Portafilter



Tamping

Greetings,

The March 2015 Iron & Steel Preservation Workshop has been cancelled due to low enrollment. We would like to convey our regrets for any inconvenience. Thanks to all who expressed an interest in the workshop and, especially, to all the speakers who had been scheduled (listed at the end of this newsletter).

Vern Mesler
Iron & Steel Preservation Coordinator
Lansing Community College

Craftsmen

Dark brown and boiling inside a thick glass bulb, brewed coffee, percolated with an electric coffee pot is a brew I remember as a young man. Boiled, roasted, scorched, and steaming hot when poured into a heavy white mug, the aroma permeated the immediate area, the kind of thing that remains forever in one's scent memories. It is an aroma I've never experienced anywhere today in any one of the many coffee shops that seem to occupy as many corners as gas stations.

My wife and I have several local coffee shops available to us, but we tend to stop at a local non-chain coffee shop near our home. It doesn't have the glitz of a Starbucks, crumpled napkins slipped under several table legs to keep the tops from rocking and spilling your drink, seat cushions worn down by patrons who have spent many hours in conversations or studying. About two years ago someone decided a couple of cushy chairs along the wall flanked by two small tables and a plastic potted plant would give the place some respectability. Today the plastic plant lives on and the small tables have survived, but the cushy chairs -- especially the seat cushion springs -- have developed some unusual shapes which are clearly felt when sitting. A combination of neighborhood regulars and Michigan State University students frequent the coffee shop. I think what draws most people is the friendly staff, especially Christine, the manager. Although some mornings as you approach the counter to order your coffee you encounter bright swaths of blue, green, red or multi-colored hair that Christine has fashioned for herself, it's her smile and friendly greeting that soon draws your attention to the business of ordering coffee.

"How would you define a craftsman, Christine?" I asked her one day. It's a question I often ask people, and I get many different answers. Most describe a craftsman as someone



Crema, a good Espresso



Jeff Seelye, Craftsman



Craftsman's hammer



Handcrafted scrolls

working in an industrial shop. My question "Do you consider yourself a craftsman?" took Christine some time to answer. She eventually replied, "Not really; I see this work connected more with culinary art." Afterwards I spent some time watching Christine interact with customers and operate her espresso machine. It soon became apparent to me that there was a lot of similarity between her use of the espresso machine and what a machinist does in operating a lathe, each skilled in setting up and operating their equipment.

Christine begins the process of making an espresso coffee by knocking out a used coffee puck from a portafilter. A sharp blow against the knock box -- a waste receptacle located near the coffee grinders -- does the job. She positions the portafilter under the coffee grinder and with two or three snaps of the lever fills it with 1.5 ounces of finely ground coffee. Christine tamps the ground coffee to compact it into a firm and level coffee puck. She then quickly locks the portafilter in one of the groupheads in the espresso machine and with a swift light touch starts the hot water to begin pulling two espresso shots. Christine completes each task through an intuitive sense of feel, sight and timing that I associate with a craftsman. And if the process is slightly off, the end result will be an unhappy customer.

I've worked with many craftsmen over the years and found that it's the respect for tools, especially their tools, that distinguishes them from the ordinary. A hammer, wrench, writing pen, a chef's finely crafted set of knives -- these tools in the hands of an experienced craftsman project confidence and ability to those who use their services. Christine may never have considered herself a craftsman, never considered her espresso machine a tool, but she has developed with the use of her espresso machine a sense of perfection that is recognized in all skilled craftsmen.

Thanks

We would like to express our appreciation to all those who were scheduled to speak at the March 2015 Iron & Steel Preservation Workshop.

Matt Hebdon
Purdue University Ph.D.
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Steve Howell
Ballard Forge, Seattle,
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Dan McCain
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Association, Delphi, Indiana

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