

# Macro Roaster of the YEAR

## Thanksgiving Coffee Company



The Thanksgiving Coffee Company crew. | Photo courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

BY  
HOWARD BRYMAN

When you love what you create, how it's created, and the life it's given you and so many you hold dear, how do you thank the people whose far more difficult lives are dedicated to creating your raw materials? How do you thank the communities that support your business, and the natural world whose delicate balance lies at the root of it all?

These are just a few of the ruminations that intertwine to form the jute sack of Thanksgiving Coffee Company, a roasting company whose quality, innovation and heart have been pivotal to the evolution of the entire specialty coffee industry.

"I think gratitude is something that all of us should cultivate," says Joan Katzeff, the company's co-founder, president and director of operations.

What started in 1972 when a couple of back-to-the-land California hippies decided they'd rather roast beans than string beads has grown steadily and organically into an organization that embraces its connectedness and responsibility in every aspect of its enterprise—a spirit Thanksgiving has in many ways pioneered in the coffee industry, as there were no predecessors to show its founders the way from "just a cup" to "a just cup."

The name Thanksgiving wasn't inspired by anything having to do with Pilgrims or Plymouth Rock. It came almost at random, says co-founder and CEO Paul Katzeff. The Pilgrim that graced the company's first roasted product labels was the brainchild of a painter Paul commissioned to create a sign for the cafe he ran in Aspen, Colorado, from 1969 to 1971, before moving to Mendocino, California.

Still, whatever inspired the name, Paul says, "That word has guided the company for the last 35 to 40 years."

## A True Pioneer

The Pilgrim that graced those first roasted product labels more than four decades ago directed its Monty Python-esque pointed finger up toward a roast date—a crucial detail Thanksgiving was the first coffee company to provide.

"To put a roast date on it was to do something really special," says Paul. "It was to say it was fresh. How fresh is it after three weeks? Fresher than what's in a can."

"Back then it was very easy to be great," he adds modestly. "All you had to do was have fresh coffee, and that was greatness. That was the earliest iteration of specialty coffee."

Apart from printing a roast date and being among the first to differentiate its products by roast color, the company also was an early adopter of the degassing valve, being first to print directly onto a valve bag.



Roaster Jacob Long with "the big guy," Thanksgiving's 60-kilo G.W. Barth coffee roaster. Photo courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

## THE WINNER'S STATS

ESTABLISHED 1972

LOCATION Fort Bragg, California

EMPLOYEES 25

LEADERSHIP Co-founders Paul and Joan Katzeff

RETAIL LOCATIONS Zero

ROASTERS (MACHINES) 60-kilo G.W. Barth and 1-pound San Franciscan SF-1

ROASTING OUTPUT About 550,000 pounds per year

WEBSITE [thanksgivingcoffee.com](http://thanksgivingcoffee.com)



Paul and Joan Katzeff in 1972. | Photo courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

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Paul Katzeff and his dog, Panda, on the dock of the first Thanksgiving Coffee roastery on the Noyo River in Mendocino, California. | Photo courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

In the mid-1970s, Thanksgiving also began constructing the now-ubiquitous supermarket fixtures outfitted with grinders, a major advancement in the struggle to win consumers away from commodity-grade bricks and cans toward something fresh and artisanal.

By the late 1980s, the company had invented (but purposely never patented) the vertical first-in/first-out retail storage system, with a waste-minimizing push-pull mechanism for self-service supermarket bulk coffee displays, although by that time freshness and quality were no longer the only pressing concerns for the company.

### A Memorable Trip to Origin

In 1985, Paul Katzeff sampled some Nicaraguan coffees sent to him by a nurse in Jinotega. They were the best he had ever tasted, but because of the civil war in

Nicaragua, no coffee was being exported to the United States. Chasing what seemed like a golden opportunity, he quickly booked his first trip to origin.

“We didn’t have a lot of coffee jargon back then,” says Paul of the term “origin trip.” He also says importers did not encourage roasters to travel to the coffeelands.

“Importers would come back with great stories, but I was never asked to go with them on their coffee adventures,” he recalls. “They didn’t want us roasters to know what they did.” This was true even though he had just become the third seated president of a still-new industry group called the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

There was a lot Paul didn’t know as he sat on that plane to Nicaragua with dollar signs in his eyes. He didn’t know why everyone else on the airplane started singing a patriotic song as they entered Nicaraguan airspace, for example. He started asking other passengers why they

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Astra

were headed to Nicaragua. Some were going to work in schools, some in hospitals, some to build houses.

“We’re going to help the Sandinistas,” Paul recalls them saying.

He had no idea what that meant.

“I got scared, because they started to talk about the civil war and the revolution and the Contras, and I didn’t know any of that stuff. I mean, I wasn’t paying attention. I was just a coffee guy,” Paul recounts.

His head swam as the plane descended. Once it landed, he stepped out onto a run-down tarmac and was approached immediately by a woman in combat boots, khaki pants, red bandana and beret, an AK-47 slung over her shoulder.

Swiftly, she escorted Paul away from the baggage and into an empty room with nothing but a marble floor, another door, and three huge, ornately framed images: Che Guevara,

Karl Marx, “and some other dude in an army uniform,” says Paul, “who I later found out was Daniel Ortega.”

Paul was left alone in the room for several minutes, his heart pounding. Suddenly, in walked Daniel Nuñez, a prominent Sandinista and president of the powerful pro-Sandinista group the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG, by its Spanish acronym), about which Paul, of course, knew nothing.

“He puts his arm around me and he leads me toward this door,” Paul recounts, “and he says to me through his translator, ‘Paul, we know you’re a humble man, but here in Nicaragua, we need you to be big.’”

Paul was led to the door, thinking there very well could be a firing squad on the other side. The door opened, and he saw a podium with more than a dozen microphones on top and a room full of people with TV cameras. It was a press conference.

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**LEFT** Separating cherries in Nicaragua. **RIGHT** Jacob Long cupping in Nicaragua. **BOTTOM** The Thanksgiving testing lab. Photos courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

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“I was introduced as the president of the Specialty Coffee Association of America,” Paul continues. “Before that door opened, while I waited alone in that anteroom for something to happen, I was just a kid from the Bronx waiting to be shot. When that door opened into that crowded press room, I realized I was no longer the kid from the Bronx, but in fact was the president of a coffee trade association arriving in a country where 80 percent of its cash came from coffee exports.”

Paul’s hosts gave him an eye-opening tour. They took him to the mountains where commanders trained new fighters, and he met with some of the aging warriors who had fought against the United States alongside Sandino, 40 years earlier.

“They indoctrinated me. They took me around. They took charge,” Paul recalls, “and I became, in my heart, a Sandinista.”

Apart from what Paul describes as a Jeffersonian scene of a nation in uprising, his unfiltered access exposed some even more deeply rattling truths.

“What I saw in Nicaragua was quite a bit different than what coffee importers were seeing,” says Paul, whose background as a social worker suddenly collided with the businessman he’d become. “I saw poverty. I saw pain. I saw illness. I saw desperation. I saw hopelessness. I said, ‘Oh my god, I’ve been trying to buy the best coffee at the lowest price for 15 years. I’m part of this mess.’”

When Paul Katzeff boarded that plane to Nicaragua, the motto of the Thanksgiving Coffee Company was, “In search of the perfect cup.” After he returned from that trip, the motto had changed irrevocably, and for more than 30 years since the company’s slogan has remained: “Not just a cup, but a just cup.”

## Keeping the Home Fires Burning

Meanwhile back in Mendocino, Joan Katzeff was keeping the Thanksgiving train on the rails, as she had done since the beginning. At the time of Paul’s first trip to Nicaragua, the Katzeffs had a 7-year-old son and an infant daughter. (Their son, Jonah Katzeff, is now vice president of the company.)

“I had to be in charge of everything on the home front, and in charge of what was going on at the factory, too,” says Joan.

She remembers standing on their deck that day in 1985, their new baby in her arms, watching Paul go down the walkway, get into his car and head to the airport.

“It’s hard to part company when children are involved, and of course, it was a very fraught time in the history of the country of Nicaragua,” Joan recalls. “I had the responsibility of stewarding the business and, in his absence, caring for our two young children.”

Joan did pretty much every job at Thanksgiving other than roasting, from bookkeeping to personnel to managing orders and supplies. And she, too, had a deep-seated and robust spirit of social activism—her grandparents were active in the labor movement in Canada and her mother marched in “Ban the Bomb” protests.

Although she was shouldering the dual responsibilities of work and home, she wasn’t flying solo at the factory. Joan gratefully acknowledges the numerous employees who have worked at Thanksgiving for decades, including one who has been with the company for 34 years.



**LEFT** Joan Katzeff at Thanksgiving’s restaurant and cafe, 1974.  
**RIGHT** Mendocino, California. | Photos courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

“We’ve always been very well supported, and I certainly was at that time, too,” she says.

## The Original Cause Coffees

When Paul got back to California, he cried for a month over all that he had seen—all of which his life in business had blinded him to for so long. The company immediately set to work developing a product to financially support the Sandinistas, while Paul sued the Reagan Administration to end the embargo that had been enacted against Nicaragua. The case lasted two years and rose to the U.S. Court of Appeals before being retroactively rendered moot by an act of Congress, Paul notes. All the while, Thanksgiving routed Nicaraguan coffees through Canada into United States in defiance of the embargo.

The company’s first “cause” coffee, Coffee for Peace, was also one of the first cause-focused coffee products ever to appear in the specialty coffee industry. It rolled out in 1986, with a portion of the proceeds donated to UNAG. The company also distributed hundreds of thousands of leaflets educating the public on the situation in Nicaragua. The program continued until 1990, when the Sandinista revolution culminated in Nicaragua’s first democratic election.

While Thanksgiving has never lost sight of the struggles in Nicaragua, it has leveraged its fundraising and educational model to take visible, productive stands—and to give thanks—to virtually everything important to the company’s vision, including workers in other origin countries, communities closer to home, and the earth itself.

To offer just a few examples: Thanksgiving has sold coffees in support of ending the embargo on Cuba. It was the first coffee company to feature photos and information about farmers on its packaging. On the home front, the company formed partnerships with local nonprofits in support of a new little league ballpark, the Mendocino Community Center, and the Point Cabrillo Lightkeeper’s Association, among others. It has raised money and awareness for campaigns and organizations to help protect wolves, gorillas, songbirds, dogs, bats and, most recently, bees.

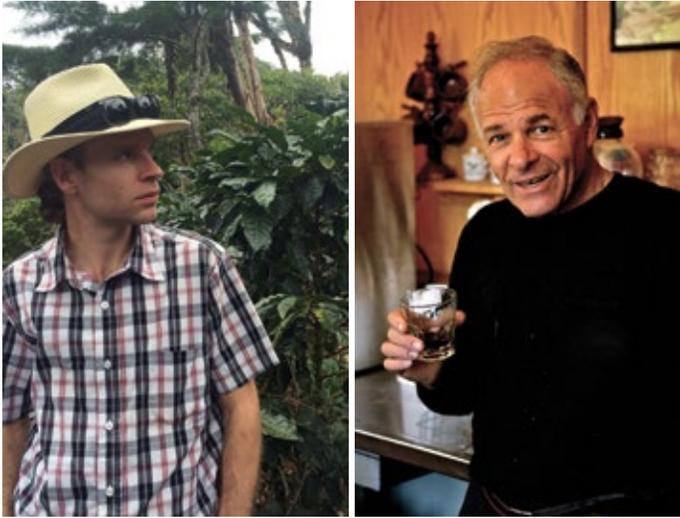
Current Thanksgiving roastmaster and green coffee buying team member Jacob Long, meanwhile, has traveled to Nicaragua twice with the company, and has witnessed firsthand Thanksgiving’s ongoing commitment to the origins from which it sources, particularly Nicaragua. In 1999, Thanksgiving received a \$300,000 contract from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to

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Full Page Ad

First Crack

New, to come



**LEFT** Jacob Long in Nicaragua. **RIGHT** Paul Katzeff.  
Photos courtesy of Thanksgiving Coffee Co.

build a series of cupping labs across the country. When Long visited Nicaragua in 2012, he was impressed by how far they'd come.

"They were producing some of the finest coffees in Nicaragua," he says. "It was really interesting to see the work that Paul had done come to fruition, so to speak, in that the quality of the coffee was so high, and the lot separation they were able to achieve."

"Joan and I feel like we're messengers," says Paul. "We couldn't have envisioned anything like this."

## Quality at the Core

None of these good works would have made any difference, or existed at all, were it not for some exquisite coffee, and the company has been around long enough to see a number of trends come, go, and even come back. Paul notes that when his first beans tumbled through a drum, for example, the bigger, older brands were the ones roasting lighter. The way to differentiate "craft" coffee from the multinational brands was to roast darker, package whole beans and sell freshness.

When Paul purchased a Royal #5 roaster for \$40 in 1969 from an Italian deli owner who used it as part of a window display in Greenwich Village, he didn't know anything about coffee roasting. He was led only by his senses, and his memories of a dark, carbon-y, intense cup he tasted at a Peet's Coffee store in Berkeley, California, and a light, sweet, fruity coffee he tasted in a coffeehouse in Greenwich Village eight years prior.

"It was all sight, sound and smell," says Paul of his early roasting days. "That's all you had. There was no way to measure bean temperature or anything like that."

While technology is an asset in the company's production plant today, when it comes to using digital tools during the learning curve of roasting, less is still more in the Thanksgiving school. A Mendocino native with deep roots in the area, Long got his start roasting on the company's three-barrel Gothot sample roaster about nine years ago.

"It's from the 1920s," he says. "No thermocouples. Only you and the beans, sight, sound and smell. I grew up around artisan products, so I think that definitely inspired me to be a part of that and produce something that's the finest."

The company continues to train new roasters first on the Gothot and later with tech tools, though it readily takes advantage of modern breakthroughs on the production end. As soon as RoastLog software came out, Long applied it to the company's 60-kilo G.W. Barth machine, aka "The Big Guy."

"That was a big step forward, from using paper graphs to actually data logging," he recalls.

Thanksgiving embraces the digital era in other ways as well. The company's website has been freshened regularly, from its debut in 1998 to the latest iteration of 2015. Two years ago, Paul enthusiastically developed and launched the "Smart Coffee" iPhone app, which guides consumers through coffee selection by shining an interactive light on such attributes as mouthfeel, acidity and flavor, and how those relate to roast color, processing method and origin.

"You can't be a dinosaur if you want to stay current, if you want to be a player," says Joan. "You have to adapt."

## Taking Care of Its Own

From its campus of about 11,000 square feet in the beautiful coastal town of Fort Bragg, California, Thanksgiving Coffee Company has grown to become one of the larger employers in the area, with 25 employees on staff. The company has provided health and dental insurance, as well as paid vacation, sick leave and holidays (including the employee's birthday), to all full-time employees since 1977. Currently, its minimum wage for full-time employees is \$15 per hour.

Thanksgiving continues its work supporting the community, having recently rolled out eight new coffees benefiting local nonprofits. Meanwhile, in 2015, the company achieved B-Corp certification and became certified by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC); the roaster also is working to help 8 coffee-growing cooperatives achieve SMBC "Bird Friendly" certifications.

The Katzeffs and their crew do all these things because, fundamentally, they're all linked. From the environment to the community to different economies, a wholesome and fair enterprise puts food on tables around the world. It puts medicine in cabinets and joy in people's hearts, yet it keeps moving forward only if no damage is left unrepaired, no wound unhealed, no system unsustainable.

In reaping the rewards, the Katzeffs and company also accept the responsibility, which is why the name Thanksgiving has turned out to be so apt.

"It connotes a wonderful philosophy of life," says Joan.

"The word is the most beautiful word in the English language, and when you say it, you feel something," Paul concurs. "But we didn't know that until we lived with it for a long period of time. It became the umbrella under which we operated. It became a word that we had to live up to."



**HOWARD BRYMAN** is a journalist who focuses on the specialty coffee industry. He currently serves as associate editor at [dailycoffeenews.com](http://dailycoffeenews.com). With experience as a barista, trainer, manager, roaster's apprentice, origin tourist and equipment tinkerer, Bryman relishes the opportunity to scrutinize coffee almost as much as he enjoys drinking it.