

Coffee with a Conscience

By Leah Gernetzke • Stevens Point Journal • December 1, 2008

The demand for socially and ecologically responsible coffee is growing, and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point is jumping on the bandwagon.

Three establishments on UWSP's campus -- the Homegrown Cafe, the Basement Brewhaus and the CPS cafe -- now are putting responsibly grown coffee at the top of their priorities and menus.

According to Chartwells dining service's marketing manager, Nancy Gjertson, fair trade coffee is free of genetically modified organisms.

It also means the farmers are paid a fair wage so they can have a higher standard of living, enabling them to invest more in their farms, communities and the environment.

Organic coffee is grown without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or hormones, she said, and shade-grown coffee is grown sustainably in its natural forest environment.

John Coletta, an environmental literacy professor, said these aspects are directly connected.

"You cannot separate the social from the environmental," Coletta said. "That is a key insight."

When the balance between the two is offset, he said, problems occur.

"Big coffee corporations go into Central and South America and they level the land and strip its nutrients, and they grow so much so they can then sell it cheaper," Coletta said. "When farmers can't make enough money to survive, that's when they turn to growing and selling drugs instead."

The Homegrown Cafe's contract with Chartwells works with the Pura Vida coffee company, which sells 100 percent fair trade, shade grown and organic coffee.

The manager and head chef of the CPS cafe, Kim Beckham, said she will only buy fair trade and organic coffee.

The coffee she buys also is locally roasted and blended in Wisconsin Rapids.

"My customers demand that I support this growing movement," she said. "People with deep pockets are willing to put their money into this."

A UWSP student and frequent visitor to the CPS cafe, Landon Gryczkowski, said he thinks coffee with higher standards is worth the price.



"If paying a little bit more means contributing to a higher standard of life for people and supporting the environment, I'm OK with that," he said.

Other students said they don't give much thought to where their coffee comes from.

"As long as it gets me up in the morning, I really don't care," Brad Shucha said. "Coffee is coffee."

The Basement Brewhaus sells Socially Responsible coffee from Stone Creek, a Wisconsin-based roaster.

According to the Basement Brewhaus's manager, Deeanna Deising, Socially Responsible coffee is the same as fair trade coffee in many regards, but does not have the same environmental standards as fair trade.

Deising said that fair trade coffee also has its flaws.

"Fair trade is a huge non-profit conglomerate now," she said. "It's taking responsibility away from purchasers -- they don't have to think about the ethical impositions that coffee farmers and coffee workers have to endure; fair trade does it for them."

She said oftentimes only rich estates can afford to pay the price it costs to be fair trade certified.

Coletta said he also thinks the movement is being undermined by corporate-based government.

"Corporate-based government has all of the freedom of an individual and none of the responsibility," he said. "It's awfully hard for fair trade to compete against free trade."

