

Searching for higher grounds with a young entrepreneur

By John Soltes / Editor in Chief

LYNDHURST (June 10, 2010) — For Lyndhurst resident Melissa Knott, it sometimes takes a quick shot of espresso to get started in the morning. Luckily for this aspiring entrepreneur, she doesn't have to look too far for a hot cup of Joe.



Photo by Matthew Stolarz

Melissa Knott offers her organic, free-trade coffee products at local farmers' markets, plus for graduation parties, milestone birthdays and just about any occasion.

"I'm not a 50-cup-a-day person," Knott said with a laugh. "But I never ever have less than two cups a day, just to keep the headache away. I do probably five shots of espresso a day."

Knott is the owner and operator of "grounded. coffee catering," a local cottage industry that looks to bring organic, fair-trade coffee to the thirsty residents of the greater tri-state area.

"I'm often surprised there is such a positive response to my business," Knott said recently during an interview with The Leader.

Knott's grounded company is a for-hire catering business that adds that special touch to events, parties and local farmers' markets. Once contracted, Knott sets up an elaborate display of coffees and teas in a number of varieties for usually drooling partygoers looking for a decadent sip of java.

Her standard two-hour service includes a full tea menu with many leaf options, espresso drinks, hot chocolates and chai tea latte. Knott also offers organic milk in just about every variety, plus fair-trade, custom-roasted beans for espresso and coffee. All of the drinks are unlimited and can be tailor-designed to a specific party's needs.

Cold drinks, like Italian sodas, are also offered, if need be.

Even the cups and napkins are eco-conscious: the cups are 8-ounce compostable containers, while the napkins are 100-percent recyclable.

Everything is up to the customer, Knott said. "Since it is catering, it's very dependent on the details of the event," she added.

The genesis for this novel business came when Knott was at school, majoring in history and minoring in math and science. She took a course concerning the American economy and its relationship to the global coffee economy.

That was when the original coffee bean was planted. Then it began to blossom when Knott managed a café in Hoboken for some time, and visited a coffee shop in Baltimore a couple of years ago. That's when the creative juices started flowing.

"I decided to try a coffee catering business ... there was no reason not to do it," she said. "I gave myself a week deadline to get things together, and that was two years ago."

Today, grounded has turned into a full-service business that has helped add panache to graduation parties, local farmers' markets and milestone birthday parties. There are still struggles. Knott is hoping to one day open up retail space, but she needs to overcome the mountain that is public relations.

"It's marketing," she said, "figuring out how to get people to hear about me. It's affordable and something they want. But it is sort of a new idea. People haven't experienced it at other parties. I'm asking them to take a small leap of faith."

The products that Knott uses are of the highest quality. She works with independent roasters, who help her select the best coffee beans from Central America, South America and Indonesia.

The Central American beans tend to be high in acidity, while their South American counterparts tend to be sweeter. The unique Indonesian beans are low in acidity, but have a "lot of body," according to Knott.

Together, they make for a "balanced, good-tasting espresso" with steamed organic milk.

For the additional products, such as syrups, this Lyndhurst High School graduate likes to use items with the fewest ingredients and no artificial materials. "Simplicity is the best option for the things we put in our body," she extolled. "I want coffee to be real."

Why organic and fair-trade coffee?

For Knott, that's one of the easiest questions to answer for her customers.

"The reason is pretty simple," she said. "Because we can. Things that cause less harm, we should choose them. There's a higher price point, but we've lived in a world of coffee where nobody producing or growing has benefitted. One way to have that change is to pay a little more for your coffee. ... My guess is that an actual cup of coffee where a living wage will be given to the grower would be more like \$4 or \$5 a cup."

When setting up for a party, Knott's prices are determined on a client-to-client basis. The fee is around \$175 for up to 20 guests, and \$450 for up to 120 guests. "At parties, buzz happens about the coffee stand and people keep coming over."

For this coffee expert, the stuff in the cup is a mood changer. "Coffee makes me so happy," she said. "Even though I know it's a drug."

The mission for this budding business owner can be found in the company name. "Grounded goes with the organic theme," Knott said. "It's also fitting for my personality. I'm not very out there. I'm grounded myself."

Knott sets up her display just about every week at farmers' markets in Palisades, N.Y. (Saturdays) and Fair Lawn (Wednesdays). She can also be reached at 1-800-519-8931 or by visiting www.groundedcatering.com.