



## ROASTER PROFILE

### ASHLAWN FARM COFFEE

BY JIM FADDEN

TRADITIONALLY, specialty coffee roasting businesses have felt most at home in cities: high population densities mean high traffic for retail shops, restaurants, grocery stores and other outlets that sell specialty beans. But what about roasters in rural areas? As urban areas become increasingly saturated with roasting businesses, expanding markets in rural areas offer new opportunities for coffee roasters.

Ashlawn Farm Coffee is a perfect example of this growing trend of rural roasters. Located on a historical farm in the tiny town of Lyme, Conn. (population 2,000), Ashlawn has successfully developed a growing retail and wholesale trade, roasting 20,000 pounds of coffee each year.

The husband and wife team of Chip and Carol Dahlke started Ashlawn Farm Coffee in June, 2002, roasting in the old milk barn of the Ashlawn dairy farm. Inexperienced, but full of energy, Carol Dahlke made the mistake of jumping into roasting too quickly. "I read a few books, researched and bought a roaster and thought I was ready to go," she says. She quickly realized that she was in over her head and eventually returned the roaster. Her second attempt started with a phone call to her green coffee importer who, in addition to fielding endless questions, encouraged her to take a more measured approach. "Really listening to advice from people with many years of experience got me off the ground," she says. In addition to purchasing a new roaster, she attended an intensive three-day training class by the roaster manufacturer to get the hands-on experience she needed.

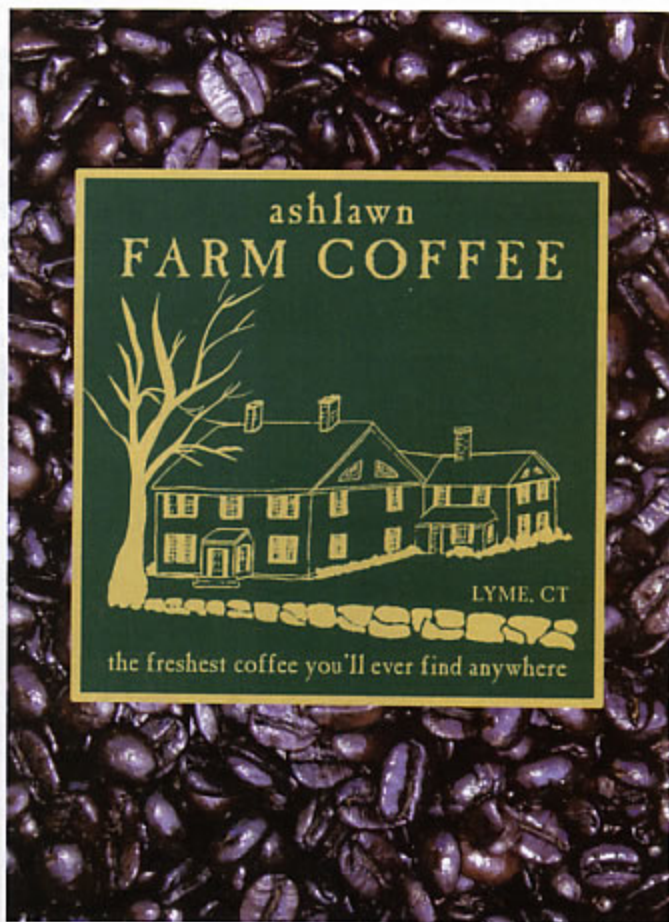
Being the only coffee roastery in the 50-mile area between the towns of Groton and Guilford in Southeastern Connecticut offers the enviable advantage of not having any competition. The disadvantage, of course, is that it can be difficult to attract attention to a new brand of coffee

that isn't located in a city. This is where the history of Ashlawn Farm comes into play. Although the farm no longer provides dairy to the surrounding communities, it does host a popular seasonal farmers market. According to Dahlke, "The market attracts more than one thousand people during a three-hour period. In addition to buying fresh vegetables, natural beef and flowers, people try the coffee and are naturally curious about the roastery in the old milk room."

Consumers return to their widespread communities after tasting the fresh-roasted coffee from the market and begin asking for the coffee in restaurants, coffee shops and groceries. This attracts business from local wholesale accounts, such as Foodworks II, a

natural foods market in Old Saybrook, Conn. According to Foodworks II Manager, Brian Octigan, "We could carry organic coffee from a number of large corporations, but our sales show that people don't want just organic coffee, they want organic coffee that is produced locally. When we finish our current store expansion, we are going to increase the number of coffees we offer from Ashlawn Farm, as well as improve the visibility of the product in the store."

The ties between the coffee, the community and the farm don't end with just the farmers market. The Lyme town historian, Hiram Maxim, has a day job as the



company's production manager. By combining coffee and local history, Dahlke and Maxim are developing a blend they believe colonial farmers would have drunk. Anchored by Java and Mocha coffees, the blend will be named the "1730 Blend" in honor of the year the Ashlawn farmhouse was built.

Roasting on a farm has led to a feeling of responsibility for the care of farmland, whether it is for dairy cattle in Connecticut or for coffee land in the tropics. More than 25 percent of the coffees offered by Ashlawn Farm Coffee are organic. Although consumers can choose from a variety of organic coffees, sales are still overwhelmingly tipped towards the non-organic coffees, such as the best-selling Farm Blend. "People in the Northeast are just starting to catch on to single-origin coffees and organic



coffees," says Dahlke. "Typically, they start with our Farm Blend, but it takes awhile for most people to branch out to something new."



What's next for Ashlawn Farm Coffee? For small roasters, success always brings new challenges. Tired of filling the growing number of orders by roasting until midnight in the company's original five-pound roaster, the Dahlkes have recently added a new 22-pound Ambex roaster. Also, they've added on to the old milk room roastery to create more retail space and room for a new café. With a commitment to history, the farm, the environment and

coffee, Ashlawn Farm looks forward to many years of successful growth in their rural market.

