

Peace Coffee

Minneapolis

Lee Wallace, Queen Bean

Lee Wallace's title may sound jokingly unofficial, but she's at the helm of a company that takes coffee—and the supply chain behind it—extremely seriously. Owned by the nonprofit Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), Peace Coffee has spent the last 15 years building relationships with growers and pushing for quality and compensation advancements, even creating its own importing company to reduce the middleman fees that can chip away at farmer incomes. Last year, the company opened its first retail spot to better connect coffee drinkers to the stories behind their beans and to create more jobs for the Minneapolis economy.



Q: How was Peace created?

A: In 1995, representatives from the IATP were meeting with farmers from Mexico, and they were talking about their broader mission, trying to learn how they as a trade policy organization could have an impact on farmers' lives. The farmers said, "If you want to make a difference in our lives today, buy our coffee at a fair price." A container of coffee was shipped up, and the folks from IATP got some seed money to buy it. They paid the farmers what they agreed was a fair price, and then they started learning about roasting and selling. By the time they had gone through the container, they realized they had actually made a profit and still paid the farmers what they had asked for. We were formed to be a demonstration project and to show you can run a financially healthy company that has a set of values about how the company treats farmers, the environment and employees. We are a for-profit company; we're just owned by a nonprofit organization.

Q: Where do your profits go then?

A: We have a profit-sharing program in place for employees. Then we keep some of the money and reinvest in the business, and some of the money goes to support the mission-based work and the trade policy work at the IATP.

Q: What kind of program do you use to ensure a sustainable price for farmers?

A: We have our own minimum price, and we've raised that every year since 2005. This year when prices were going up, we increased it further. I'm glad that everybody is talking about prices now, but I think prices are not effective compensation on their own. In addition to price, we really think about partnerships. If yields are down for a coffee farmer, that impacts their

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income. We work with farmers on roast-
ing projects, on income diversification
and on supporting their own agronomy
projects so they can improve yield. We
focus on a twin goal of excellent sustain-
able coffee and sustainable incomes over
the long term.



Q: In what ways do you also work to
fairly compensate your own work-
ers in Minneapolis?

A: We have more than 30 employ-
ees. Everyone has living-wage
jobs, and everyone, including baristas,
gets health insurance, dental, sick time
and vacation. Making that happen takes
a lot of determination and creativity. It's
also important to make it part of what
your customers feel like they're support-
ing. We were born as a mission-based
company, so it's just what we do every
day—we figure out how to make these
things work.



Q: After importing and roasting for
15 years, why did you decide to
open a retail shop?

A: When we started think-
ing about our next stage of
growth, we realized we wanted to continue
to deepen our presence in Minneapolis
and to find a new way to engage our com-
munity. This is an opportunity to create
more jobs in our hometown. Also, about a
quarter of the space in the coffee shop is



dedicated to a training lab. What we really want to do is continue to provide education to baristas and teach baristas about what roasters do.

Q: How did you go about designing and building out the café?
A: We've always been a company that really feels like we put our best foot forward when we engage people creatively and when we let people run with their ideas. We had an amazing assortment of local artists and craftspeople who worked on this project, as well as a tremendous number of volunteers. Then a designer named Haley Johnson, who we've collaborated with almost from the beginning of Peace Coffee ... she brought it all together. I often call the coffee shop our Sistine Chapel that we built on an Ikea budget.



Q: Do you think the space ended up accurately reflecting the company?
A: All of us who work here love that we're trying to build this entire supply chain that sustains people and that tells a story about the way we think the world should be. But we're also very tactile people who love tasting food and seeing visually interesting things, so this coffee shop became an extension of that labor-of-love approach. We hand-pieced two tile floors in the shop. A lot of the wood was salvaged from homes that were being torn down. All of that wood was hand-pieced together for the benches. I look at the shop as an extension of the passion, perfection and craftsmanship that we put into roasting coffee. ☉

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