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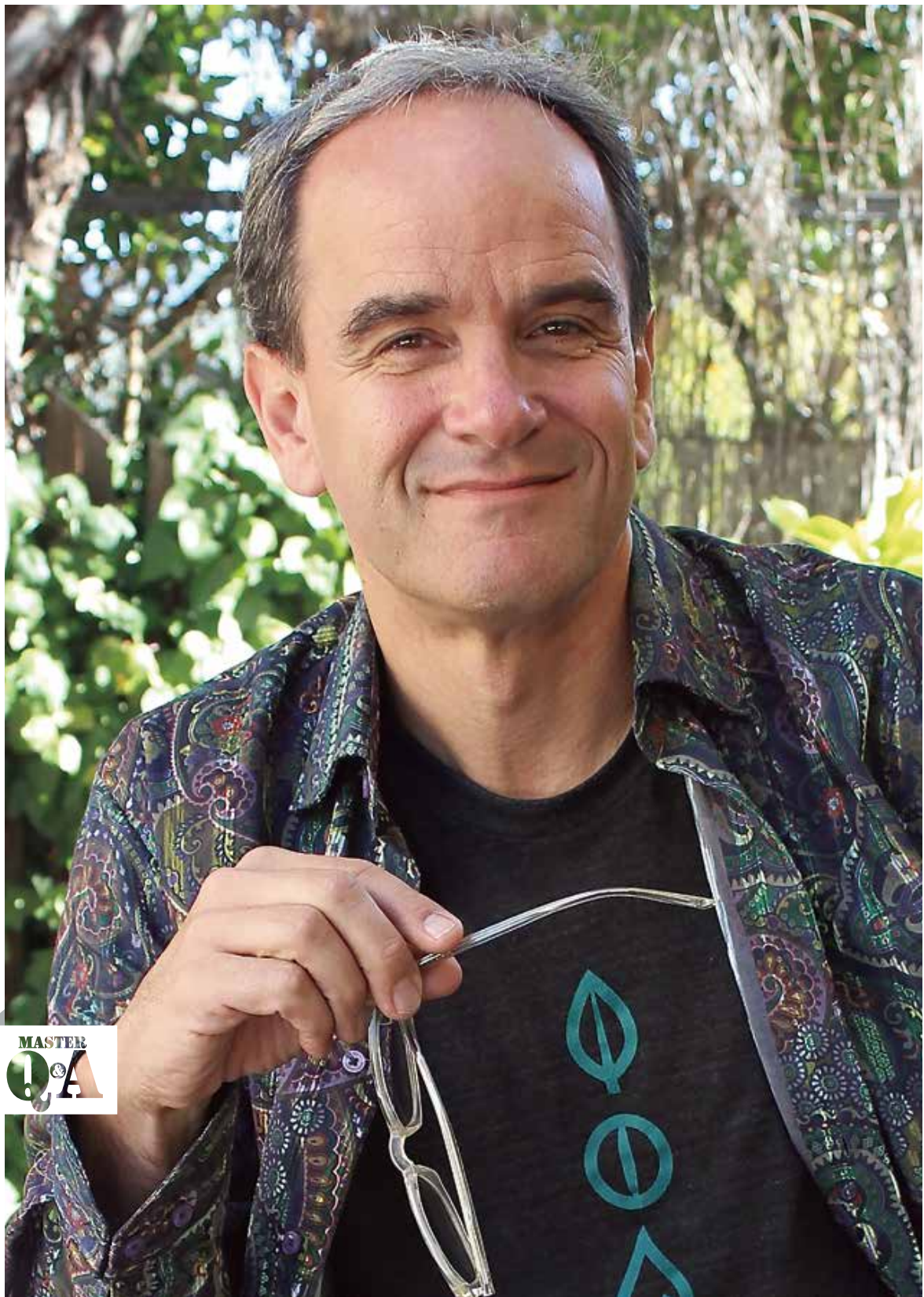
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MASTER Q & A

Willem Boot

LONGTIME TEACHER, LIFETIME STUDENT

By Erin Meister

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS to determine a good teacher from a poor one is how eager a student they are: The best teachers remain curious, humble, and open to learning new information, regardless of their level of expertise or experience. In that way—and in many others—Willem Boot is an exceptional teacher: Even after a lifetime (literally, his entire life) involved somehow with coffee, the master cupper, roaster, and farm owner still collaborates, listens, and appreciates the mastery of his industry peers. When we met over Skype for this interview, the first thing Willem mentioned was the incredible learning experience of getting his new Boot Coffee Campus certified as an SCAA teaching lab. “This past week, I was not only confronted with some of my own bad habits in filling out a cupping form, but also I was reminded of how important it is in cupping...to always be 100 percent ‘on’ when you do that very important process. For me

that was a very valuable experience. I truly enjoy being a student myself, to just sit and listen and learn and enjoy in that way.”

Willem’s coffee consultancy and professional school, Boot Coffee, has been offering master classes since 1998 on a wide range of coffee-industry skills and subjects, from coffee sourcing to roasting to building a webstore for your business. Now, many of the courses are available online at www.coffeecourses.com, as well as in-person in the company’s beautiful new California training lab. Boot Coffee also sells green and roasted Geisha coffee from Willem’s farm in Panama, La Mula.

A trainer and educator myself, it was a special treat to sit down with Willem to hear about his coffee history—teacher to teacher, student to student—and I hope you’ll come away from this Master Q+A feeling inspired to both lead and learn as well.



Erin Meister: *What was coffee like in your house when you were growing up?*

Willem Boot: My earliest memory of coffee is as a 5- or 6-year-old boy, playing at a green-coffee warehouse. One of the fragrances I remember at that time is that smell, that fresh smell of green coffee. My dad was managing a regional roasting factory in Holland, and occasionally I would go there. The memory of laying on the green coffee bags as a very young boy is a very strong memory—together with when I saw a roasting machine, which to me looked like a huffing and puffing locomotive, with all the sounds and smells and moving parts! Watching this as a young boy was an amazing thing.

EM: *Did you start drinking coffee at such a young age?*

WB: The actual drinking of coffee started when I was probably 12, 13. At that time, my father had become disillusioned with the corporate style of roasting and selecting coffee. He set his mind on becoming a roaster-retailer. In his preparation, he designed a small roasting machine for consumers at home. While he was testing out his machines that he had been designing, he then decided to open a small retail shop where the machines—which were called the Golden Coffee Box—were installed. When he was in the very beginning of that I was 12, 13, and that's when I first started drinking coffee.

EM: *Did you work with your father there? What types of coffee were you exposed to through that experience?*

WB: I was 14 when I first started working in his shop. He had single-origin coffee only. He wanted to do away with everything that defined coffee at that time. That meant no blends, complete transparency, trying to find the best possible component and best possible flavor, and selecting coffee for the pure enjoyment of the consumer. When I consciously started drinking coffee, I was learning to appreci-

In 2005, Willem explored the highlands of the Baru volcano with famed Panamanian producer Graciano Cruz (left), who helped Willem create Finca La Mula, the Geisha coffee farm that won the Best Of Panama in 2014 and two Good Food Awards in 2016. Willem says that Graciano's "friendship and out-of-the-box quality vision became a true inspiration for my coffee career."

ate that zesty acidity of a Kenyan and the chocolatey, more sweet nose of a Guatemalan. I developed an appreciation for coffee that was just good by design. That's very different from most people's experiences; most people start with very bad coffee!

EM: *Did you always expect to go into the coffee business like your father, or even with him?*

WB: There was a time when I thought to do something very different, because following in your father's footsteps as a teenager was not the most charming thing to do, right? But while I was studying—I studied economics—I was basically the head roaster of my dad's business, and I started to develop a very deep appreciation for my relationship with coffee. It was not like I started to decide that that was going to become my destiny, but it became kind of inevitable. It's just like if you fall in love with someone, it's not necessarily a decision, it's something that happens. It's something that becomes part of your body and your soul. That's how I see my relationship with coffee.

EM: *As a teacher, you've motivated and inspired so many other people in coffee, so I wonder what your early experiences were with being taught and mentored. Who were your early inspirations and teachers?*

WB: My father was definitely my first and most important educator, without any doubt. He was both a good educator as well as an awful educator. He was good in the sense that he knew very well how to package the education in a very powerful way, and always by using the flavor of the coffee, or the smell of the coffee, or the feel or the sound

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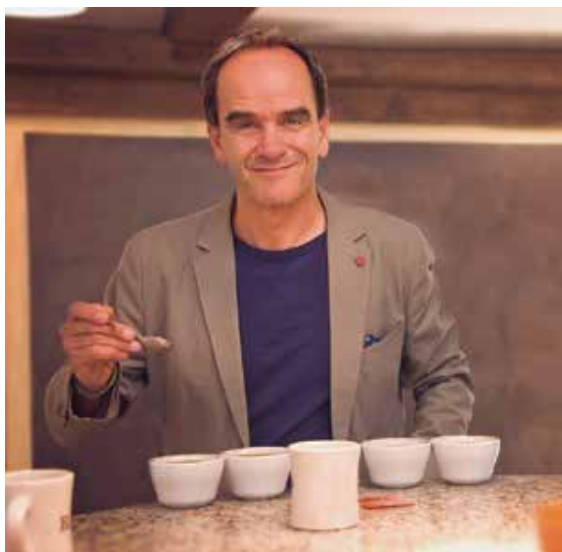
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of the beans—aspects that would be trivial to others, he was using them in all their essence. Always he used blind tasting, always a lot of discussion, and that automatically gets you into the heavier part of the education, which is a lot of confrontation. Continuously questioning others, and confronting others in their approach and analysis. As a teenager and when I was in my twenties, we had a lot of discussions and arguments about coffee. At the dinner table there was hardly ever any discussion other than coffee.

EM: Any other teachers who could stack up to your father?

WB: When I moved for the first time to the U.S., I started working at Probat, and one of my first inspirations was Werke von Gimborn. He was a very legendary person in this time—not only the president and CEO of Probat, but he was also very much a German gentleman and an absolute coffee expert, someone who knew coffee from his father and grandfather. He became for me an inspiration of personality. Another person is Pete McLaughlin, the founder of Royal Coffee, who was an educator himself as well, and who I invited for some seminars and courses I organized at Probat. With that group, Erna Knutsen, Jerry Baldwin [a cofounder of Starbucks], Jim Reynolds [of Peet's Coffee]—these are all people I got to know. And most important as well Alfred Peet, who I got to meet early on when I came to the U.S. These were very, very important people who not only inspired me, but also gave me a lot of extra knowledge into areas that I would not have had experience.

EM: What do you think makes a good teacher?

WB: What I learned from my dad was when you have an education-

Clockwise from top left: Willem at the ready in the Mill Valley cupping lab where Boot Coffee originally got started. Thousands of students visited this intimate training facility, which is now located in San Rafael, Calif. Photographed in 1977, Willem (right) shows a green coffee sample to Alexandre Beltrão, who was the longest-serving executive director of the International Coffee Organization (ICO). Willem recalls, "His visit to our family-owned coffee retail store, The Golden Coffee Box, was a big surprise, and he stayed for hours to taste a variety of single-origin coffees." In 1999, Willem volunteered as a coffee teacher to smallholder coffee farmers communities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. "We presented coffee quality seminars to indigenous farmers," Willem remembers. "Many walked for hours barefoot to attend the training sessions."

al opportunity with someone, do not confuse these two elements: Teaching someone can be separate from someone liking you. You can teach someone and be very strict with this person, as a result of which, this person at this moment will dislike you. As an educator, you have to separate that, because it's not about you making a personal relationship based upon sympathy—but it can be a relationship which is based on empathy, which is slightly different. It's a very distinct line; it's the difference between being nice and being valuable. I think every teaching opportunity should be seen that way. It's not always easy, because you always have to be "on," and sharp, and very focused, but that's definitely something I try to do. Alfred Peet was very similar in that way. He was extremely confrontational. Not because he wanted to piss you off, but really because he wanted to get the maximum out of that moment. Teachers all have their own style. This past week, I enjoyed a great training by Trish [Rothgeb, of Coffee Quality Institute and Wrecking Ball Coffee] who is a great trainer. She is able to give the subject matter an extra dimension. That's the skill of a truly good educator. She is a truly good educator.

EM: Do you think that coffee is something that can be taught in a

class, or does it really require hands-on learning?

WB: I am very much of the school of thought of learning by doing. Learning by doing most likely puts you in the spotlight, in front of someone who is going to purchase this coffee or drink this coffee. We forget sometimes that you can be a perfectionist in a certain area of roasting or cupping or brewing, but ultimately that message has to arrive with the consumer. You have to be able to face the consumer, and to show them what is the flavor, and be sure that the flavor that you're intending to develop really arrives at the other end. That, in my opinion, can only be truly done when you're doing it. With a product like coffee, where there are so many aspects that influence the quality from a technical perspective, that by allowing the product to flow through your hand and by smelling it and feeling it, you as the expert can develop a subliminal knowledge of coffee, as a result of which you can smell a coffee or taste it and there's something that you know about this coffee for which there is no logic reason that you know it. That comes as a consequence of learning by doing. Obviously the importance of gaining the theoretical know-how and to understand the procedure and measurements contributes to that subliminal knowledge level.

EM: *Talk to me a little about Geisha: Why is such an important variety to you?*

WB: The first time I smelled Geisha coffee, it opened a whole new chapter in my career. Here we have a coffee that purely and only because of its genetics, independent from roasting or brewing protocols, has the ability to create this very unique set of sensory attributes. Obviously I don't want to discredit all the other wonderful coffees there are in the world, but Geisha, however someone brews it or roasts it, when you smell it and taste it you just immediately know that this is

something truly unique, something out of the ordinary. That's genetics at work. With other coffees there is also genetics, but there's also the subset of processing, conditions, the lucky conditions of microclimate. With Geisha it's truly genetics, and that's the beautiful part.

EM: *What do you think is the biggest misconception about coffee that coffee people hold?*

WB: I think most coffee people know that there's hardship around the production of coffee, right? But I think a major misconception today is—this is my assumption here—coffee people today think that coffee farmers are better off today than they were 30 or 40 years ago. They think that specialty coffee has made things a lot better for coffee farmers. I think that has absolutely been not true. Unfortunately, it appears they are worse off now than they were 40 years ago. Even though specialty coffee by volume has become a much more popular product, most specialty coffee is procured on a commercial market using the connection with the New York [C] market. As a result, farmers are still dealing with the forces of the traditional commodity markets. If you look at the price level of coffee today compared to 30 years ago, they're not better; they're worse—especially if you include the high increase in cost of living in coffee-producing countries. I think that is a major misconception, and I think we have to create an improved awareness with coffee people so they are really going to start thinking about how to deal with this. We must think more about how to give a better share of this single-origin coffee that we sell for \$4 a cup, how to give a better share to the farmer. If the market cannot do that for us, then we must develop ways to do it for the farmers. We must come up with out-of-the box concepts that will help us arrive at that. **b**



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