JOE LOZANO AND CLAY ROPER
Third Coast Coffee Roasting Company - Austin, Texas
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Anne Gessler: My name is Anne Gessler, and this is the Foodways Texas Oral Project. Today is February 3rd, 2012. And we're sitting in the green coffee warehouse of the Third Coast Coffee Roasting Company. And I'm so glad that you both could talk to me today. And your name is?

Joe Lozano: My name is Joe Lozano. I was born November 13, 1953, and I am a roaster and owner.

AG: And thank you so much, it's a real pleasure to talk to you today.

JL: Thanks for putting up with us [Anne Gessler laughs].

Clay Roper: I'm Clay Roper. I was born January 7, 1978, and I'm a manager of sorts here [Joe Lozano laughs]. And thank you for coming.

AG: And again, thank you both for agreeing to talk to me today. So I'd just like to get started and maybe ask, where did you grow up? And where did you go to school? And what brought you to Austin? So, those 3 general questions.

JL: So I grew up in San Antonio. Where I went to school, I went to Edison High School, a public high school. I went to a one-year junior college at San Antonio Community College. Moved up here to do some carpentry work in the seventies, and kind of stayed since.

AG: And how was Austin different from San Antonio in the 1970s?

JL: Austin moved a lot slower. San Antonio was busier; it was closer to the border. There was a lot more activity with people coming and going. Austin just seemed like a sleepy college to me, back then. It's changed a little now, but that's kind of the main difference to me.

AG: And could you talk about those changes; I know they're legion. But what are some of those changes you've seen in Austin since the '70s?

JL: More traffic. When I got here in the seventies, on the weekend, Friday afternoon the town would be quiet. You could walk down the middle of the street, and barely a car would go by. And Mopac wasn't build yet. The interstate was two lanes, one direction. It's now, what, like four lanes, one direction? That whole down and overpass that's in there and Mopac's out here now. The town's grown quite a bit, so. What else do you want [laughs]?

AG: Well, could you talk to, maybe, were you aware of the cooperative scene in the '70s? Was there a defined community of cooperatives in Austin then?

JL: The only cooperative I remember when I got here was Wheatsville. And you paid money to be part of the cooperative, and everything was, you'd buy in bulk in a bag. So it was before all the packaged stuff they have now. I think it's the same location that they had, originally. That

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was the only experience I've ever had with a co-op, other than the one I'm involved in now. So that was early on. You know, other than what it represented of what a cooperative was and how you bought into the system and what it affords you, I didn't know much about it. And before I got to this co-op, I probably didn't track anything else cooperative-wise since.

AG: And so, had you experienced, had you had any experience coffee roasting or the coffee business at all before you started your company?

JL: No. Most of my working life had been in restaurants and odd jobs here and there. And it was just an opportunity to get involved in a coffee roasting business. And I thought, because of my cooking background, it wouldn't be a hard thing to do. Which didn't turn out to be true. But before that I didn't know--I mean, I had no idea that people picked coffee off a bush. I knew that it was a brown bean that someone roasted, but that was it. I had no idea that the world of coffee existed beyond that.

AG: So what was your, what other kind of cooking experience did you have? And how did you learn to cook?

JL: I needed a job when I was really young. And it was get in, you know you're 16 years old, it's easy to go work for, I think it was like Church's Fried Chicken or something like that. Or I would work in what they call soda fountains, in the back of drug stores, where you do short order cooking. So I started doing things like that, and the better skills I got, the better jobs I could get, the better jobs I got, the better people that I worked for, the more I learned about cooking. So, that's kind of how it progressed. It was just, you know, one job to the next.

AG: OK, so I'm going to shift to you [Clay Roper], so that we can get your backstory as well. If you don't mind the awkward transition.

CR: That's fine.

AG: So where did you grow up? What led you to Austin?

CR: I grew up in Plano, Texas, just north of Dallas. I went to public school there as well. Decided not to attempt college at the time, right when I got out of school. And lived in Plano and the Dallas area for a number of years after. Just basically odd-jobs and, and life. And eventually heard enough about Austin and kind of the differences between Austin and the Dallas area. And thought that it sounded like a more suitable place for someone like me to spend time. And I found that to be true. I definitely am more at home among the, the peoples and the culture as it is in Austin, than I was in Dallas. I, I've seen it change just in the time I've been here, which is about 6, 6 1/2 years. But I still definitely feel a much more kindred spirit with the community here, and the city itself.

AG: So can you talk about that community? So what does make it different from Plano? How are the people different that you found in Austin different?

CR: Well, I know I can only really speak to my experience, and I can't necessarily say that the same type of people in a community weren't present in Plano. But for what I found, one, the sense of cooperation, the sense of more attentiveness to natural spaces. Love the Greenbelt and the ability to access that in a variety of ways. The attentiveness to health. Seeing you know, that we have Wheatsville, or Central Market, and Whole Foods, which I know those are just stores, but the attitude of people that are conscious of their health, going along with that. In a raw word, an "earthier sense" of person and approach to life. And a little more laid back, and a little less focused on the aggressive career path and kind of material pursuits of life. And things that are more related to just a laid back kind of approach. Music, art, and interaction with other people. Again, not to say that, you know, Dallas and Plano are peopled by nothing but soulless automatons, but I just definitely get along better here.

AG: And you said that you, something that appealed to you about Austin was the sense of cooperation. So were you aware of cooperative process and collective decision-making at all in Dallas and Plano?

CR: No, no, I'd say that the only kind of experience before really working with Joe and with coffee of what a cooperative might be is having vague knowledge and heard about, of like a cooperative format and structure, and not having any notion about what that really meant in terms of giving people a voice. Before, if I think of "voice of the people," it tends to bring up, you know, like, notions of revolution, and socialism, and things that also at the time I had very vague notions of. But definitely, you know, moving here and before becoming involved with coffee, I had no relationship with a cooperative at all.

AG: And, had you experienced cooking or, or preparing drinks or any kind of food-related experience before you came here?

CR: Not really. I'd worked in food service in various aspects, but never in preparation of food or preparation of beverages. I'm not a cook. I can make my way around making juice or cutting up vegetables for a salad, maybe. And I can boil some water. But I'm not very experienced in that. I love the process of eating food and sharing it with other people. But I'm just not really well versed in the actual, the culinary aspect of it.

AG: Yeah, I like how you were saying that you like the sharing and preparing part of the food--the communication part of food. Can you talk more about that? Why is that important?

CR: Well, I think it's, it's, I don't want to say talismanic, but there's a sense of there being a common, common ground. Everyone has to eat, it's something we can't avoid. And one of the great things about what I know at least of being a human, is that we can find enjoyment in that. And we can express ourselves and our method of celebrating life by cooking in different ways,

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and taking food and combining them in either novel forms or combining them in ways that hew close to tradition. In order to celebrate the commonality of eating, in order to have something that we can gather around to talk about before we do other things, whether it be things that are troubling us, or things that excite us, or just sharing information. I think bonding with other people is always made easier and better and a richer experience when you have something like that kind of as the core that you can gather around.

AG: And Joe, you're shaking your head, too. Do you have something to add to that? Why is food important to you?

JL: I think it's actually what it, exactly what it is, is what Clay is saying, is that we all have to eat. And I think, people and the way that they cook is part of their heritage and I think that allows everybody to group together and speak back and forth about that. And it's not a real judgmental thing. It's more like, if you cook this way, your culture is, you know, Italian or Spanish, or whatever it is. And you can enjoy the differences in the food, but you also learn about people, and you know, where they come from, and what drives them.

AG: And that seems to be part of your mission, too. As a part of a cooperative, coffee roasting cooperative and working with Latin American and African trading partners, is, like, cultural exchange along with product exchanges.

JL: Yeah, I think so. I think the coffee is just a mechanism to do that. Coffee is like the food, it's what we have in common. We learn about each other and our cultures, and the way we do things, and the things we believe, and how we handle the challenges we have. And I think that's what, for me, it gives me pause to watch someone else live their life and make the decisions that they do, because sometimes it's things that never would have occurred to me, so.

AG: And so, getting back to why started your business. So, what, what made you--if you were going in from construction, and other jobs, what made you decide to start a coffee company?

JL: I had an opportunity, after I had got through in a restaurant with an individual, to open a coffee shop, and it was going to be a roaster retail kind of location. So you know, you do your business plan and you can, you find a spot that will financially support what you want to try. And that's how I got into it. And this was still before the cooperative that we're involved in. And it's, you've got to buy coffee. And I learned how to source coffee, and test it, and you know, buy a quality product. And still at that point I hadn't visited a farm; I had no idea if it was a big farm, small farm. It comes from a plant, and it's in a bag, and it's green. And that's kind of how I ended up in it. I really had no intentions in being in a co-op, it's just something that came across the path.

AG: Yeah, so how--can you describe that learning process? How did you learn how to source your products? How did you learn how to run a company from not knowing anything about the business--

JL: --I did a lot of management in restaurants so I already had a good awareness of a profit loss was, and how to run something financially smart. And it was just a matter of learning about coffee. And you can get a lot of books, and they talk about coffee has this characteristic or that characteristic. And then the books talk about how you buy coffee. And then it was a matter of roasting samples, and trying them, and saying "I like it," or "I don't like it." It's that simple. I mean, not that coffee isn't complicated. But, it still comes down to, does it taste like a good product that you can do something with? And then you'll buy it, and if not, you don't. So it's just a matter of you know, it's an analysis thing.

AG: Can you describe what it was like running your first coffee shop?

JL: It was it was kind of exciting and nerve-wracking. The exciting was doing something new and trying something and see how people reacted to it, see if you have the ability to make a living out of it. And that was also the, the nerve-wracking part was because you're standing in front of people, and they're going to tell you exactly what they think about what you've done. And if they don't like it, there's no place you can go and hide and wait until they're gone. So for me that was the challenge, was learning how to listen to what people said about what I've done, and not take it in a personal way. But trying to find a constructive way to make a product that they were happy with, or realize what they were saying, and what they really meant. And that to me was the challenge of it.

AG: Now, what did your coffee business look like?

JL: What do you mean?

AG: Well, describe it for someone who hasn't been there.

JL: So like, I started out in a building; it was 536 square feet, so it was really small. And I had the roaster in there, and the coffee bags were on the floor. I had 2 or 3 cabinets. One of them had the urns that I brewed coffee in. The other cabinet was where I stored the beans I roasted. And then I had a counter with the cash register. It was kind of a retail--you know, you get your coffee and get out. It was really small inside. I had an exterior kind of patio with a roof on it. And it had maybe 4 tables and maybe a dozen chairs. So it was more of a to-go. And in the late afternoons, people would come and sit around. So it was a pretty small, simple place. And I kind of liked that. It was, I guess, intimate, would be a good, good description of it.

AG: And what kind of people would visit your store?

JL: Anybody that came off the street. I mean, at the beginning, it was people coming into town. Because that's what I'm positioned myself, is trying to catch morning traffic. And people would come off the freeway and down the street, and then turn around, and they'd get coffee, and head on their way. Or they'd get coffee and pastry, which I forget where I got them through, the local

bakery. And later afternoon were probably more people that were in the neighborhood that had businesses. There were people who were like haircutters or people going, stopping by on their way to work at a restaurant. So it was more, the afternoon was more people that lived in the areas, and the morning was mostly people commuting in to town and out. So. That's kind of who came in through there.

AG: And, what was the neighborhood?

JL: The neighborhood is, it was, what is that, West Lynn. So, part of Clarksville. So I'd say we were 3 or 4 blocks from the Clarksville neighborhood.

AG: And can you [Clay Roper] talk a little bit about your first experience at Third Coast?

CR: Well, my first experience with Joe was at Los Armadillos. That's the company that he initially started. And I joined up with them in 2006. In October. At the time, it was, I had been here for not to long. I needed to pick up some work. And the person that Joe had delivering coffee for him, locally, doing wholesale deliveries was an acquaintance of mine, he was going to split to go to Europe for a while, do a bicycle tour, and needed someone to take his job over while he was going to do so. So I started delivering coffee a couple of days a week, taking it to you know, local coffee shops, restaurants, dropping it off. And after a while, Patch, the previous delivery driver came back, couldn't really get his job back because he'd sold his car to afford the trip in Europe. So I ended up keeping the job on. And then, really over the course of time, adding on more responsibilities. Coming in helping Joe clean the shop, and then helping package coffee, and then after a few months he started working with me on the roaster, and just kind of escalating on from there.

When I started with them, he had moved to Red River and Cesar Chavez. And it was actually one, a little more than a quarter of a warehouse that also had a commercial kitchen in the back, and then housed the carriages and stuff for the horse-drawn carriages that give tours throughout downtown Austin. It was a nice space, it had the two roasters and you know, espresso machine, it was a lot of wood. It had a nice open feel to it. What I liked was the fact that people would stop by, you know, for coffee and conversation. It wasn't a retail coffee shop at that point in time, it was just a, just a wholesale roastery. People from the neighborhood that would come by. When people would come and order in and either, you know, I would be on delivery and Joe would have to do something as well, or if it was a nice day and the rock wall was climbing and Joe went to climb, you know, someone that wanted to come by and pick up their order would leave it on the windowsill outside. It still had a very, kind of small town, very approachable feel to the way that the business was. So that felt really at home to me, to have that be, it's not--I don't get along that well in the corporate world, not for any reason other than that I like the human aspect of this, and this is a people business. So that struck a chord with me. So that's basically, that's where kind of things were when I joined up.

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AG: So did you say that the store was around where the horse carriages were giving tours? So what was that like, I mean, just watching the horses come and go [laughs]?

CR: Well, the horses usually would show up later on in the day. The horses themselves are stabled somewhere else, I don't know where. But they kept the carriages, so they'd bring the horses in towards the end of the day and get them brushed up. And make sure they didn't have--I don't know what all they did to them. But they'd hook them up to the carriages and then take them off. I guess probably just like I am when I go on a road trip, when I get out of the car, I need somewhere to take care of kind of biological business. So the horses would do the same thing, unfortunately sometimes in the parking lot, was the downside of it. On the plus side, it's nice to have a diversity of business. You know, it's not like we're a coffee shop on our own, or a coffee roastery on our own with no other businesses around. But we're there between the carriage place, and the commercial kitchen, and then the sign place next door. That was over in the part of town that's now, you know, had a few high rises go up in it, and a lot of the houses in the neighborhood have been sold and turned into food establishments or bars. That I don't even know what the name of that neighborhood is--

JL: Rainey Street.

CR: Rainey Street. Yeah.

AG: Yeah, that, so even in the--did you say the 6 years you've been in Austin, there's been an incredible amount of change. Can you speak to that change?

CR: Sure. When I got here, it definitely wasn't "sleepy," in the sense that, you know, Joe said. Or there's an apocryphal that I remember running into a few times when I first came to Austin, about, "Oh Austin used to be this great place where someone could fall asleep at the traffic light and people wouldn't honk at them. They'd wait for them to finish their nap before moving on." That's not the Austin that I moved into. But, it definitely had more of the the feel of--I could see that it was the town that *Dazed and Confused* was kind of inspired of and about. And now, there's there's more money, more professionals. The skyline has really changed since I moved here. A lot of the--there's I don't know, a half a dozen or more actual very high rises that have gone up. And there are so many places around town that I've seen mixed-use retail and residential places go up. And I've seen a lot of businesses come and go. The town is definitely growing, and you can feel it in not only the traffic, but just in the way that the sense of it has changed. There's still a core, you know--A lot of this I think we make up in some ways. Or at least there's a psychological component to the way that we feel about a place, and what we'll choose to notice or pick out. So I recognize that. But I do feel like there's still that core of what Austin is, here. It's just that it's growing up. You know, the city is becoming more mature, and a little more, has more cosmopolitan influences that weren't around.

AG: OK, so I want to transition back to you, Joe. Can you talk about the original name of your establishment, and then why you decided to change it to Third Coast?

JL: The original name, Los Armadillos was conceived partly for fun. Which was the "armadillo" in Los Armadillos. Because Texas and Mexico are really not that far apart. So that was initially the reason why I carried on. I got involved in that with 6 other partners. And their different expertise than mine. I was going to do the bulk of the work in developing the roasting. And they were going to help with sales and marketing it. And over the 12 years or so, very little of that was done. So at the end of that period, I had an opportunity, this business here, Third Coast, had been around for 8 or 9 years or so. And during the summer when my business was slow, I would come here and do roasting for the woman that owned this business. So I knew, what is it, about 4 years ago that she had gone through a divorce, and wanted to sell the business, was tired of the coffee thing, and I had an opportunity to leave out of my situation with Los Armadillos and into this one. So that's how I ended up here.

AG: So maybe we could talk a little about the philosophy that underpins the Third Coast Roasting Company, because it's so integral to your operations. So could you tell me a little bit about the mission and purpose?

JL: Well I don't know that we have a mission or purpose. For me, an open door is probably a good, symbolic--kind of like Clay was referencing earlier about going somewhere and putting a bag of coffee on the doorstep, and someone's going to come by and pick it up. And I know that sooner or later they're going to pay me back. And if they don't, it's a bag of coffee. And you know, it's a cheap thing to find out someone's integrity. So an open door is a matter of, if you have the nerve to walk in, there's a good chance you can get something here. And I invite--the idea of the open door is to invite what's out there in there. So I like dealing with life on that, on that level of, what is it today, and how am I going to interact with it. And hopefully produce more good than bad in the course of the day. So, I think that's the mentality that I approach this business with. And you know, there's, there's a business component where you do things to where you don't lose money and you price--but I think the attitude about it to me is more important than the business aspect. Because the business you can learn to run. Having something that you can do that reflects what you believe about life, to me is really important. So that's how I tend to view it.

AG: So when you came here, was it already affiliated with Co-op Coffee and other?

JL: When I was in Los Armadillos, Bill Harris, he is, he is one of the founders of Co-op Coffee. He was involved in, he and his girlfriend were involved in coffee in Guatemala. And they were selling some of the first Fair Trade organic, not that organic was new, but the Fair Trade was. And he used to come by and try to sell me coffee. And I'm a little bit blunt, so you know, "Just leave the coffee, and if it's good I'll call you back." And the coffee was good, and he kept nagging me. So I started buying coffee from him, and I think it went on for 6 or 7 months. And he came by and said, "Well, I've been selling coffee to you and 6 other people. And I'm thinking of starting a Fair Trade cooperative." I'm like, "What does that mean?" "Well, I want some money." So he gave me a pamphlet on Fair Trade and cooperatives. So I did the research on it

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and found out what Fair Trade meant. And at the time I did the research, coffee cooperatives were one of the most short-lived things, because after 2 or 3 years, they got to a certain size, and the individual philosophies tended to tear it apart. So I thought it was a great thing to invest money in [laughs]. And that's how I, literally how I ended up in the cooperative. I was still fairly naive about, beyond the definition of what a cooperative was, and beyond the definition of fair trade, I had no idea what I was getting into. I just knew that roasting coffee, I have to buy coffee from someone. And just without going anywhere, I could change who I bought my coffee from; and it would have a direct effect on someone. As opposed to buying it from a broker and who knows where it came from. And that appealed to me. So, that's the main reason I got involved in that co-op.

AG: So can you describe some of the activities that Cooperative Coffee does with outreach and training and also visiting other Latin American and other cooperatives?

JL: I think my first experience was a cooperative that we started with--I don't think they're part of Fair Trade anymore. It's called Mut-vitz and we went down to visit their community. And they're fairly remote, and they were speaking a language that was probably a thousand plus years old. So there was a lot of Spanish to their language, from English to Spanish to their language, and back and forth. And what they would do is, the women and children were trying to start projects to supplement the income. So what we would do is we got a hold of people in the States, and they donated heirloom seeds. And we would go down with them and show them how to do organic gardening. So the women and the children would participate in that. And the idea behind the heirloom seeds is that they can replant it, year after year. So they started that project. And then we raised some money and bought them pigs and chickens so they could, between the gardening and the meat, they could increase the quality of the food they ate. And they had something to sell. And the pigs and the chickens--I think the attrition was like 60% the first year because 1) they didn't know how to do it, and 2) they were out there in the wild. And we just gave them a whole bunch of animals they could feed the local animals with [Clay Roper laughs]. So that was my first experience on what the cooperative did and what they were about it.

And the complexity of it has changed now, as far as what we do, but it's basically the same thing is, trying to help somebody with a need that they can't necessarily do for themselves. Because, you know, when you're doing subsistence farming, and that's the way you live, you don't look beyond very much, much beyond that. And I think that having opportunities to help people with something that they need is a pretty good deal.

AG: Can you talk a little bit about the knowledge exchange that happens between producers and buyers? So you're saying that people will come down and help some cooperatives start organic farming and some community building. But what, what goes on the other side; how do you learn from each other?

JL: So part of what, part of what we do as the cooperative is that we will take the skills that we have, and if there's something that they wanted to take advantage of, we will make that

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exchange. If they want to involve themselves in selling their coffee locally roasted rather than green, they're going to make more money. So we can provide, since a lot of us are roasters, or some of us have shops, the expertise of how to set up a shop, and how to produce a product, how to roast a product. I think what we get in the backend from us, is the ingenuity that you can give, the knowledge you have to them, and you come back later and see how they have adapted it with their perception or their way of being is things that don't occur to us because we live in a world where we assume we know everything, or what we know is better than what someone else does.

But when you see someone take something that you give them, and they make something different out of it, or they alter it in a certain way, I think it's pretty amazing. There's an example where the, in Nicaragua, the government was trying to, they're trying to revive the coffee industry in Nicaragua. And to that end, they are supplying them with these somewhat modern, what they call "wet mills" where they ferment the coffee before they dry it. And there's, they need to use water, and they pump it up to the top floor. And they had these pumps where you hand-cranked the pump, and it draws water out. And this one guy took a piece of string, and he tied a knot in it, and put a little rubber gasket on it. And then he ran the string through a piece of PVC pipe, and just kept pulling the string. And it created enough suction to draw the water up. And it was something that the machine was not designed to do, but the guy adapted it do that. So now, when they go to another farm, and they supply them with this equipment, his little innovation is now part of it. And this is what I see over and over again; is that they'll take something and make some kind of innovation to it, to where it's a little bit more efficient than whoever that designed the machine. And then the communities embrace that, and that's the new thing that people do. So, you know, they're no less astute, or aware, and intelligent than we are. They just maybe lack the resource to education that we have. But, you know, they're just like we are.

AG: If I could turn to you, Clay [laughs]. So when you first started working here, to now, can you describe how your understanding of cooperative organizing and cooperatives has changed or evolved?

CR: Certainly. So, in the beginning I had no, no real notion of what a cooperative was, other than it's people getting along. And then, you know, from there I learned it's where everyone is supposed to have an equal stake and an equal say. And I probably lived in that mindset about it for a while, just in terms of how I would think about the cooperatives we were working with, and then as I heard about Wheatsville Food Co-op and then as I learned about other domestic, you know, here in the States dairy co-ops, and then you know, fruit co-ops that grow, you know, for Welch's Grape Juice or whatever. And then my understanding has definitely deepened and become a little more complex as I've learned about other forms of co-ops, where people may have equal say, but have an unequal stake. One thing I've learned through that process, is that "fair" and "equal" are not interchangeable words. They're not equal concepts. And that sometimes in order for things to be fair, there will be a slight inequality, if you look at it a numerical sense, but it turns out to be fair based on, you know, input and output. And I've definitely, you know, gone through the--from ignorance to idealistic to pragmatic evolution about

learning that cooperatives like anything else face their fair share of challenges. And while they're a great response to a way to deal with a group of people, it's the same thing where theory and practice can vary.

And I see also that what I've learned with my experience and origin, which is limited so far, is that, you know, even with the cooperative model, putting massive amounts of people together is just really complicated. It's hard to deal with a lot of people because as the numbers get larger and the system gets more complex, it's hard for any, the system that we have to deal with it well. Not only do you have more individuals with varied agendas, but you just have so many working pieces that it's hard to find one blanket solution. So what I see when we look at things like cooperative unions, which are cooperatives of cooperatives, essentially, where you might have 7,000 smallholders involved. You know, 7,000 members of, for instance, this group we work with in Peru, that's so many cooperatives of so many families. There's still, at that level, you know, you have to deal with bureaucracy and representation and administration, and all these things that are way more boring and dry than I imagined, at the beginning, cooperatives are.

But that's the nature of life, and that's kind of the process that we go through when learning about a number of things. So I still think that cooperatives are more than viable. I think they're an excellent way to handle groups of people. I think they are a great way to handle approaching things. But it, one thing that's necessary in a cooperative is members that are invested in it. Not just financially but emotionally and ideologically. That they are focused on a common purpose and agree on a common means to achieve that purpose. Because without it, like Joe was saying, you'd see a lot of coffee cooperatives kind of being torn apart by the individual ideas or directions. There's no way that if you get a group of people together that are trying to move in different directions, it goes from being a group to just a bunch of people walking away from each other.

AG: Yeah, so could you describe maybe how people who--how cooperatives who are successful, how do they inculcate that same ideology or that same commitment--emotional, intellectual commitment to the cooperatives' success, both in the producer cooperatives but also in these union of cooperative, I guess in Canada and North America?

CR: Well I think a lot of it is involving people, is showing that, that there's a benefit for them to be involved. What we see with producer co-ops is that, especially when things happen like have happened for the past couple of years, where the market price of coffee--which is what drives all prices of coffee, including Fair Trade. As it's been so high, that it has in some ways minimized the financial benefits of Fair Trade, we've seen that it makes it, it makes member retention a little bit difficult. Just because people don't have quite as strong of financial incentive to be part of the fair trade program and a part of the cooperative. But there are so many other things to a cooperative than just the fact that there's a financial benefit of turning your coffee into your co-op for the fair trade. There are, there's access to credit, which for a lot of people in developing or disadvantaged nations--both of which are terms I dislike, but they are what we use to describe them--might not have had access to before. Credit is an innovation that can be used

for, definitely for good. So, access to credit, access to training, access to other social services, such as education and resources that are involved with that. And general education about the industry that they find themselves in. Coffee, in particular here. And that sense of involvement is very important with a cooperative. It helps foster this sense of community that is already present. But aside from just community around the ideals of general daily life, it's a community that's fostered around the work that they do. So, I think, to me, that's the most important thing, to keep the cooperative going, is to keep people involved in it, and to make it so that it does, in some ways, serve their own interests and the interests of keeping their family safe and secure and healthy.

AG: And then how would you ensure the survival of these other cooperatives in North America, I mean, including Canada?

CR: Do you mean in terms of--?

AG: I guess, sorry, let me rephrase that--How do the dynamics work with Co-op Coffee? How do they ensure that members work together to ensure basic Fair Trade contracts are upheld in other Latin American countries?

CR: Do you mean how does Co-op Coffees make sure that the interchange of trade in cooperative coffees and then the folks they're importing from stay? That's definitely a good, a good point to make because we've had a couple of--I wouldn't say falling out--we've had a couple of situations where we've suffered, like, a break in the relationship with a producer co-op. There was a group in East Timor that we used to import from and they decided to change the direction that they were taking the way that they traded. We no longer buy coffee from them. And there's a group in El Salvador that did something similar. The particulars of the situation is different, but the end result is the same. But when we find that the answer there is basically the same as the cooperatives themselves. It's keeping involved. It's keeping the channels of communication open. It's working with things like pre-financing. It's working with things like going and having information skills exchange using the knowledge that we have that, that they might not have, and sharing it with them. It's kind of a basic, human thing. It's the biological theory of kin selection, where you're more likely to help someone who's related to you than someone that's not. And we are definitely involved in, in that process, with our relationship with our cooperatives. So the more that we visit with, the more that we are willing to work with, and be flexible in terms of their contracts and do things like renegotiate pricing depending on the vagaries of the market, then the more that we draw closer to the co-ops that we work with.

AG: OK, and turning to you, Joe [laughs]. Could you talk a little bit--Before we started recording, you were talking about the trip you took to Mexico, and Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Could you describe that, that meeting, and what it was like to be part of a large body of people in, in that conference?

JL: The meeting was, it's our annual meeting. [phone rings] And we allow, we invite our producer partners to participate so they can see how we conduct business. And we talk about the extremely, to me, boring stuff of, you know, here's your profit loss and here's your general ledger, and here are the challenges we are face within our co-op and here's how we're handling it. As members of the co-op, we're all required to participate in it. So, I'm part of a Green Bean Committee, and there's other committees. So that's kind of what the discussion of the what the whole meeting is. And they participate in it.

And the other reason we had them down there was because there is a, a movement within Fair Trade to include large plantations in the Fair Trade, because the people that are missing the opportunity to sell Fair Trade coffee and for the farmers its and the producers it is maybe not a slap in the face, but it's a fairly serious thing. Because the idea of Fair Trade was to benefit small producers that didn't have a voice. And they have put a lot of work and effort into complying with the standards to be certified for trade inspections. And the way that they organize their co-ops and govern themselves is all part of that. And now they feel like they're losing their voice in this thing because now the plantation is going to be part of that. And they're going to have a bigger voice because they're a bigger size.

So that, I think, was more important than us having our annual meeting. And so that was part of the discussion, I think, that brought the whole thing more meaning than just our annual event. And everybody has an opinion and it's fairly heated. A lot of them are already being certified by other groups. But their fear is that American and Canadian buyers are looking for the Fair Trade logo, and Fair Trade decides to certify plantations, what choice do they have, as long as the Americans are looking and the Canadians are looking for that logo as representing truly fair trade, and they're not aware of what's happened. They're kind of between a rock and a hard place, because they've, they can't sell to that market if they don't have that certification, but if they have a certification, they're not going to have a voice in it because now the plantations have more clout.

So, that, I think, was probably worth making the trip for. The trips to Guatemala and Nicaragua were to visit places that the co-op buys from and for us in particular, we buy from a certain region in there. And to just go visit them and their communities, find out what their challenges are, is there something we can do? What is it? They want to know what is it they can do to make more money on their coffee, and how to go about it, and then discuss the challenges they have, and what we see as the product, and what could be causing that. That's kind of what the trip was.

AG: So what was the first trip you ever took to, to your trading partners?

JL: The first one was the one I referred to earlier in Mut-vitz.

CR: That was in Mexico?

JL: Yeah, that was in Mexico. That was in the Chiapas region. And it was interesting because the "Mut-vitz" means "bird mountain." And it was mountain that these birds would migrate up every year. And what the locals figured out was they could run these nets, and then the birds would come up, and they trap the birds and eat them. So it's called Mut-vitz, but there aren't any birds anymore [laughs], because people get hungry. And I learned really what went on with the coffee pickers. There was a project they had going where they were, they grow honey. And at that point, it wasn't a lot of honey, the project was just starting, but they were doing beekeeping. So we went and visited the area where these people were growing the bees. And on the way back, we were hiking up the foothills of this mountain. And this older gentleman and his son are coming up the hill. And he's carrying, he's got like a strap on his head, and he's carrying a bag full of cherries. And tries to get us to take the bag. So I'm feeling like I'm badass. So I put on the bag on, and it's 100 pounds plus of wet [cherries], and you've got this band across your head and you're hiking up the side of this mountain. I don't know how they do it. I'm sure I could acclimate to it, but the guy is probably mid to late 50s and this is life, hauling this bag up two or three times a day. And it's just arduous work. And I don't--I think the thing that surprised me the most is nobody complained. Nobody said that their lives were terrible. Nobody said that they wanted to be, wanted to be helped to be educated, or they wanted help in medicine. They just wanted to make more money on what they were doing. They didn't ask you to run their lives. It's just that the fact that people work that hard, and they don't complain. And they were glad to see you. They were inviting you into their house to eat their food, that by our standards was pretty marginal. I thought it was an amazing thing.

AG: And just for people who don't know, can you describe a little bit more specifically about what the difference between a large plantation is and then a cooperative?

JL: So the cooperatives, I think, are limited by the size of their farm. So depending, they on where you go, they measure them in, what are they, hectares, what is the other one the measure? There's another.

CR: Aside from acre?

JL: Yeah. So they're basically having plots that are 10 acres or less. And a plantation is bigger than that. And the definition is, is where on a small farm, you're not going to have semi-permanent labor. Whereas the plantation is so immense that they can house people there. And if the people don't like what they're getting paid, where else are they going to go? And if you're in a small farmer cooperative, your neighbor's not paying, well, the worker can go next door. So it forces them to hire within the community and to pay fairly. Because if they don't, someone else will take the worker. So I think the definition is the size of it is the big distinction.

AG: So trading with cooperatives and being part of a cooperative union, has that influenced the way you understand worker relations, even within the US, and even within your own business?

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JL: I think it's made me aware of the difference between someone that has people working for him, and realizing that those people are just as important to their survival. As opposed to people that just hire someone to fill a spot. And I think that, to me, is the biggest distinction, is that, it's all in how you behave towards someone. Because everybody's going to have to do something for a living. And who you align yourself with, I think, gives your life value or not. And I think that's what I've learned from those cooperatives, is that's what it's about. Is that it takes all of us to do it. Whether you like it or not, it has to go that way.

AG: And how--I'm going to go over here [laughs]--how about you? How has interacting with cooperatives in Latin America and Africa and then also the cooperative union, has that changed your attitude about cooperative organizing or even just worker relations in your own life?

CR: I would agree with what Joe says. It really brings to light the, the fairness or the equality that we can seek in terms of, you know, working and respecting people on an equal level. I'll say that working here, I definitely feel like, and this is in no way a slight to your [Joe Lozano] position, but I feel more like I work with Joe than I work for Joe. And that speaks volumes to his ability to foster a good working relationship and to the way that we're able to then extend that to the other people that we work with. Not just, you know, within our business, which is small. We've got 5 people here, including the 2 of us, but working with our, our suppliers and our customers. It just, to me, it's maybe not even something as specific as, "Today I'm going to work, you know, with other people as though I'm thinking of the cooperative model." But it just keeps a constant kind of mindset of approaching things in the sense of the human relationship. That's the respect of knowing that we're all just doing what we need to do, and doing what we can, to make our lives run. And trying to approach that with, you know, the people that print our bags, and the people that buy our coffee, and the people really at every level of it.

One thing that I like a lot about our importing collective, Cooperative Coffees, is that we have email lists where we talk to each other about a variety of member issues, or green bean quality, or other things that are specifically related to the co-op. But then we'll also use that members list to ask each other questions like, "Have you ever had a problem with this particular type of espresso machine?" or "What do you guys do for sick pay?" or "I've got--does someone know where to find a roaster part." Or questions that I couldn't dream of asking another coffee roaster anywhere. But we're very open between the coffee roasting companies to share that information. And our cooperative structure is such that we're not a cooperative of businesses in any sense other than the importing. Otherwise, we're completely our own for-profit enterprises that don't have any connection in marketing or profit-sharing or anything else other than just importing.

But the mindset that's created by that is that we're collaborating towards doing something better with our trading practices, really spills over into the relations that we have between the roasting companies, and that's definitely just kind of a constant presence in all the other business relationships that we foster. Because, and even just down to the simplest of, someone that wants to talk to us about, "I'd like to buy coffee for my restaurant or for my salon, or I'm just interested in having some coffee." When I talk to someone like that on the phone, the first thing I tell them

is, "Come here and have some coffee with us and meet us. And let's talk. Let's get to know each other first. Let's make this about, about whatever kind of human relationship there is there." Because the rest of it to me is not--it's important for us to make money, but it's not going to be fulfilling, it's not going to be enjoyable. And to me, it's not a sustainable thing to have a relationship that's purely based on the merits of the business. There, I think there are enough people involved in business, there are enough people that have a similar mindset that are involved in the type of business that we are, to be able to find good human relationships in the midst of it all.

AG: Yeah, maybe you could speak more about sustainability. So it seems like you really stress environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, but also like this ethical responsibility, ethical sustainability. So how would you really define those aspects of sustainability as it applies to this business?

CR: Well, so from the, from the beginning of that, the ecological sustainability is our focus on organic coffees. And our, our focus on, here at Third Coast we focus on transitional coffee as well, when we can, which is that coffee that is in the bridge between conventional and organic. They're getting their certificate, which we help support that process. Because the more we can support that are in transition, the more likely farmers are to go through the transition, which can be a financially expensive and kind of risky period. It's one way of us kind of supporting of the whole notion of the growing and processing of coffee within whatever harmony there can be with the ecosystem. One thing that I love seeing about coffee is that people will take the pulp that they get off of the coffee and turn that into compost that they then dress the plants with and take water that they use to wash the coffee and put that on to other crops that they grow and make it in some ways a zero, hopefully, close to zero, some--what is it? "Zero," not--

AG: Waste?

CR: --"zero waste," thank you. I don't know why that word is escaping me. And then that, that comes through, you know, we have to put it on, we have to put them in bags, and put them on ships, and then put them on trucks to get them here. And that's an inescapable part of being in a global industry. But we try to bring that sense of use and reuse to everything that we do. We keep our burlap sacks here, and then we'll give them to people that want to use them for whatever their purposes are. Do the same thing along the way with, a box comes, something comes in a box and we try to turn around, as long as it not, we haven't have got a detergent or something, we'll turn around and we'll package it to ship it off to someone else. And part of that is us being ecology sensitive, and part of us being financial sensitive as well.

But then you talk about ethical sustainability, and that to me is, it's a kind of a hairy subject sometimes. But I, I want to know that we're making choices that are in line with respecting the dignity of other people. And that's that we're not taking advantage of somebody else, that we're not looking at a situation and saying, "Well, I want to find the cheapest coffee that I can," or "I want to find the cheapest source for any of the other products that we use to put together our

final product." It's knowing that we're able to find a respectful compromise between, or a respectful agreement about the price, and a respectful agreement about the way that business is conducted. That to me creates something that is sustainable. Because you can find a cheap source for something. But usually if something is inexpensive, it usually means that there's something that's either cheap about the production of it, or there might be something that's ecologically unsound about the production of it, or someone along the way isn't being paid fairly for their part in it. And I don't think there's anything that's sustainable about that at all. It doesn't produce a healthy working model for someone or something somewhere in the chain.

We just spoke earlier with a guy that's doing a masters thesis about Ethiopian coffee and it's place in the world. And one of the things we did was break down the cost of what we pay for coffee, and then the various costs that are associated with us producing our final product, and then from there, the costs that are associated with a coffee house or restaurant producing their product. And when you add it all up, and see that everything is done in that manner, it becomes an expensive product. But I don't think that's a bad thing. I honestly think if we were able to buy everything in our lives in that kind of sense, being responsible consumers, and seeing that things are responsibly produced, we'd have a lot less stuff. It would be more valuable, and I think that in general--I don't know, this might sound like a very idealistic thing to say, but people would lead happier lives. It's hard to see how we can get there from here, but I think every little bit we can do in the way that we conduct our business to work that way, and hopefully share that with other people that we interact with, will create some kind of sense of growing ethical sustainability.

AG: And Joe, you're kind of shaking your head at that too. Do you have anything to add about that?

JL: "Huh?" [laughs]

CR: "Who me?"

JL: I think that ethics is maybe more an individual thing than it should be. I think it's something that we don't consider to be the primary reason to do things. I think that for me, it's a, it's something that I want to do. And if it doesn't--if I can't support it in this, I'll do it in something else. Because it's, it's the same thing, it's buying, buying coffee because you're in the coffee business, but changing who you buy from changes everything else. And I think that it's a real simplistic way of looking at it, but the longer you do that, the more things benefit from it. And we should be paying things that are fair. And things would cost a whole lot more if we did. And like Clay's saying, we would have a whole lot less stuff, because we, you know. My, a friend of mine from the Philippines loves the bumper stickers that say, "Free Tibet." His idea is like, "if you want to free Tibet, quit buying cheap Chinese crap." And that's a real good point, because we've become so consumer-driven that we want something cheap. But we don't know what the cost is for having something cheap and that way we repeatedly buy it and just from the waste generation standpoint. But what about the human hand that produced that cheap product? And

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nobody considers that by changing that decision, you can change that dynamics. And for me, being able to do it, even if it's in a small way, is something I like to do.

AG: And I wanted to get back to this idea of community, not just, you know, broadly, cross-nationally, but also in the store itself. So if you could describe what the store looks like? Like for example, when I came in, the door was open, everyone said, "Hello!" And it was very welcoming. Could you describe again, what the store looks like, and how you generate a sense of welcome, welcoming feeling?

JL: Well the store is open. You can walk in the store and see the work areas, you can see the roaster. If the back door's open you can see the alley and the little garden that we planted in the back. The colors are really bright. There's a lot of windows. Everybody smiles when you walk in the door. So, it's a welcoming place, and I think that's what people look for, is something they feel comfortable with. And you know, we all have different personality, and some of us more so than others. But it's not in a negative way, it's just who we are as people. And it doesn't seem to be off-putting. If anything it's maybe an attractive thing because it's real people in a real situation. And for me, I'm always looking for wanting to be part of my community here, but I can't do everything in the town. I can't be part of this organization or I want to contribute to that. And I, I just want to do something in the community that fits with what I feel. And there will be something out there, and I'll attach myself to it, and see how long it goes.

AG: Well, I think I'm about finished with my questions. But before we end, do you want to tell a story or say something that you don't feel like fully addressed in the questions before we stop? I'm going to go to you [Clay Roper] first [laughs].

CR: Well, actually I was just inhaling to breathe. I was trying thinking if there's anything we haven't covered. I think you've been fairly thorough. I can touch a little bit on, on the last question that you asked. And that's to say that we, generally, are either working very diligently at producing our coffee or eating tacos and sharing laughs. And I think that helps contribute to the sense people have when they come in. One thing that really strikes me about the customers that Joe and now the rest of us have cultivated over the years, is that there's some very loyal, very loyal customers. We have one particular group of restaurants that is hit on constantly by other coffee roasters. And not just the owners and managers but the other employees have a well-entrenched habit of telling them not to even bother. "Don't leave your. Don't, I'm not interested. We're not going. I don't care what you're prices are like or your samples." And just because they're that committed to everything about what it is that we do. Not just the coffee but the way that we treat, that we treat the people and work with them. And that's something that we see with now people that walk in and that live in the neighborhood and come buy coffee, or we don't live in the neighborhood but come by here to buy coffee from us when they can. Is once somebody starts showing up and buying the coffee, they really enjoy the coffee, but they also enjoy the sense of openness. And sometimes the kind of challenge that we present, you know, there's a--I know one thing that's common about us--Joe described the different personalities, one thing that's common is we all do share a sense of humor. And sometimes the sense of humor

is one that invites you to either join or not [laughs]. And I think that's something that's good to respond to. I'm glad to be a part of this. And I think that we're in the right place to be doing what we're doing.

I think that Austin is, is always going to be somewhere that's interested in not only the sustainability that we've talked about, but in just the other aspects. That when you turn away from ethics, and you turn away from organics, and you look at just the pure experience of it, what is it to have a cup of really good coffee? Because actually, that's something that we haven't talked about in all this. And maybe I can address it just for a second. Is, that while it is ethically sourced, and while the coffee we buy is organic, it's also a really good coffee. We don't buy our coffee based on wanting to find the best coffee that we can. We buy coffee that is high quality that is also has all these other things we talked about. So I can't say that we have literally the world's best coffee. But I can say that the coffee we do get is high quality. And that Joe's roasting style brings a lot out of the coffee that it is a wonderful pound of coffee. Or a cup of coffee. However, you know, you're enjoying it. That's something that we can't, I don't want to gloss over. I don't want to escape. We bring coffee in from a variety of different countries. They have each their own personality and their different way of displaying it. And I think that people in Austin, the foodies and the people that enjoy the taste experience, the sensory experience, really respect that, in conjunction with everything else we have. So, at this point it works out well [laughs].

AG: Well thank you very much. This was great. And Joe, do you have anything else you want to talk about? Maybe not give away state secrets about your roasting process, but anything you can leave us with?

JL: I, I look at the whole experience with Cooperative Coffees and what I've learned from the farmers is something that has benefited me more than I feel like I've benefitted them. And I'm not saying I haven't. But I view that as something that has personally affected me. And so that's an experience I would repeat again, and I'm glad I've had it.

AG: Well, thank you so much. This has been really fabulous. This the Foodways Texas Oral History Project on food co-ops. Thank you.

CR: Thank you.

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