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# Good Coffee Farms Inc.' Carlos Melen brewed fairer trade

## Roundtable

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When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. When life gives you coffee, build an empire. This has been the path of Good Coffee Farms Inc. (GCF) founder Carlos Melen. In The Japan Times' 42nd Sustainability Roundtable, Ross Rowbury was joined by Melen in a lively discussion about Good Coffee Farms Inc.' incredible impact on the farmers who grow coffee beans, the consumers who enjoy coffee, and the natural environment their coffee is produced in.

Melen grew up in Guatemala, a country that struggled with poverty. He always had an entrepreneurial spirit, however, and opened his first business at just 14 years old, selling T-shirts. At 18, he had the opportunity to travel in Japan and was absolutely enamored with how different every aspect of life was here. He didn't speak any Japanese or English, but felt a calling to stay. While he loved his family and homeland greatly, he "wanted to get a chance in life to do more, and so when that chance came to my life, I just thought I've got to take it." What was supposed to be a few months of travel turned into 20-plus years of residence in Japan, and the journey to Good Coffee Farms Inc. began.

Upon deciding to stay, he was met with many difficulties due to Guatemala being a relatively unknown country in Japan in the

days before social media and quick Google searches. When applying for jobs and apartments, employers and landlords had never heard of his home country and turned him away. When talking with Japanese people, he found that they thought Guatemala was a brand of coffee, which greatly confused him — he didn't realize that Guatemalan coffee was such a world-famous export.

Ever the entrepreneur, he decided that the best way to overcome the difficulties he was facing as someone from a small Central American country unknown to the general Japanese populace at the time would be to start his own business. He thought of the saying "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" and asked himself, "What is my lemon in my life?" With this incredibly positive mindset, he turned his "lemon" into a global business that specializes in his homeland's most famous export: ethically sourced and sustainably produced coffee.

His first venture into the coffee industry was a company called Darks that created beautiful, luxury coffee gift sets. It did pretty well, to the point of gaining media attention back home in Guatemala as the first overseas luxury Guatemalan coffee brand. As the business progressed, he began getting a lot of questions from consumers about how coffee is produced, including its environmental impact, and the labor that goes into growing it. This prompted him to investigate his production pipeline more deeply, and he went to Guatemala himself to learn more. What he found did not sit well with him at all.



A Good Coffee Farms Inc. pop up store at Tokyo square garden. GOOD COFFEE FARM'S INC.

The norm in the coffee businesses is for factories and middlemen to take the lion's share of the profits, with whatever is left over distributed to the farmers. However, the money these farmers get often is actually less than the money needed to grow the plants themselves, leaving the farmers in perpetual debt. All the beans supplied to Melen's company were produced by farmers living in poverty, and as someone who came from a similar background he became determined to find a way to pay the farmers fair wages.

Many people don't realize that while coffee businesses are often massive global entities, the farms that the coffee comes from are small and pool their crops together to be sent to factories. Coffee trees produce fruits called cherries, from which coffee beans are extracted and processed. The factories require a great amount of electricity, water and fuel, and produce quite a bit of waste. It is also impossible to trace coffee's origins once it reaches a factory because all of the beans are mixed together.

Upon discovering these environmental and economical issues within his industry and understanding that he could not force the market to suddenly start paying higher prices for his coffee, Melen realized he could no longer operate within the norm and would have no choice but to develop a completely new business model.

He laughed as he recalled the number of people who called him crazy at the beginning over his radical solutions. In order to make sure that farmers were being paid enough to stay out of debt, Melen completely cut out all of the intermediaries — including the factories that wastefully processed the coffee cherries. This left him with quite a massive problem to solve: how to process the cherries? He needed "a real solution to a real problem," he said.

He learned how to grow coffee himself, and developed a completely new way to process coffee cherries that eliminated the need for heavy machinery: a bicycle-powered machine of his own invention that can

separate the beans from their husks without using any electricity, fuel or water. Because farmers could use this bicycle to process their own coffee, Melen now could control the entire production process from the original crops all the way to distribution.

Not only do the bicycles help him provide his farmers with fair wages, they also eliminate most of the environmental impact. Melen can also now trace all of his beans directly back to the farms they came from. While he was initially met with resistance from local farmers who dismissed him as a crazy kid with a bunch of bicycles, once he was able to show the results of his invention the business spread like wildfire. He started getting positive press coverage, and grew his network from three or four farmers to over 200 in just a few months. He now works with farmers not only in Guatemala, but has expanded into Colombia and Brazil as well. Good Coffee Farms Inc. is now changing the lives of hundreds of farmers while also protecting the natural environment their crops are grown on. Melen said, "I see myself as more than a producer or sales guy. ... I'm building communities."

It took two years of overcoming red tape for Melen to find the right channel to import his coffee into Japan. There were a lot of challenges, and he was also met with resistance on the Japanese side. His hard work paid off, and even though he had no connections with roasters or wholesalers in Japan, he believed in his idea and products so fiercely that he strode forward with confidence. He brought 7 tons of unroasted green coffee beans and one of his bicycles to the largest convention of coffee roasters in Japan. Not only did he establish relationships and friendships that would help him establish his distribution network from Hokkaido to Okinawa, he blew the minds of other farmers from around the world who had never seen anything like his bicycle before. They were so excited about it that he invited them to Guatemala to ride the bicycle and see the farms that use them.

Once he saw how much people loved the bicycles and the experience of visiting the farms, he developed MyFarm Keiyaku,



Carlos Melen GOOD COFFEE FARM'S INC.

which allows Japanese roasters to co-own his farms and send people to them to work alongside Good Coffee Farms. This allows the Japanese roasters to create their own recipes of coffee while choosing the variety they would like to farm, plus tell their customers that they have their own farm in Guatemala without having to actually buy land and take resources from the local population. Several Japanese roasters with five- to 10-year contracts currently travel to Guatemala during the harvesting time under this program.

Good Coffee Farms Inc. currently brings in about 50 tons of coffee per year, purchased by many of the top coffee roasters in Japan. Melen talked about how Japan is a massively important country within the global coffee trade because Japanese roasters are willing to pay premium prices for the highest quality. Because the Good Coffee Farms Inc. bicycles don't require water to remove the coffee beans from the husks, a lot more flavor is retained and the result is sweet, well-balanced specialty coffee. Good Coffee Farms Inc. has even opened a shop near Tokyo Station where people can taste his different coffees. Looking to the future, his goal is to expand his farms to Ethiopia and Indonesia, and distribute to more and more countries across the world.

It is safe to say that by staying true to his conscience, remembering his roots and believing in his mission to change the world with coffee, Carlos Melen has successfully turned his lemons into lemonade.



Good Coffee Farms Inc. employees using the bicycle depulper. GOOD COFFEE FARM'S INC.

# Cheltenham Ladies' College: Tradition, bold innovation

## Education

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Having recently celebrated its 170th anniversary, Cheltenham Ladies' College has been a bastion of education for young women and girls ages 11 to 18. From its Victorian roots to its role today as a global educational leader, with students from over 40 countries and 80% of them boarding, CLC continues to evolve under the guidance of its 11th principal, Eve Jardine-Young. In an interview, she shared insights into the college's enduring legacy, its pioneering connections with Japan and the ongoing challenge of preparing students for an unpredictable future.

## Tradition as a catalyst

Jardine-Young emphasized the value of tradition not as a constraint, but as a source of courage and belonging by connecting students with the past and those who came before. "There's this idea of 'cherishing' that I think is crucial. We don't value traditions out of a sense of obligation, but out of free will. Once upon a time, these great women that came before us were 11 years old as well, and grew to be amazing leaders, taking it one day at a time," she said.

While tradition is a cornerstone of Cheltenham's identity, Jardine-Young is mindful of the potential pitfalls of an over-reliance on it. Schools as old as Cheltenham that have a rich, inspirational history can "be the handbrake on how fast you can move and adapt," she acknowledged. "Something that enriches you can also be heavy baggage. As the years clock by and more tradition is behind you, you have to

be more intentional about what you leave behind and what stays with you."

She is keenly aware of the tension between preserving these traditions and embracing innovation, admitting that CLC has had difficulty at times in distinguishing between traditions that align with its core educational values and those that are simply habitual. "The appetite is to keep adding more and more to the shopping trolley and not take anything out," she illustrated. Adapting new ideas and simultaneously considering what could be relinquished while maintaining CLC's roots is a constant challenge.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested this balance in unprecedented ways. As children were quarantined at home and schools scrambled to adapt, Cheltenham, as a boarding school, faced the additional challenge of maintaining its high standards across multiple time zones. "We were forced through crisis into a period of digital galvanization. We had to rise to the challenge, having no road map nor traditions whatsoever," she recalled.

But when the pandemic began to abate and the college resumed face-to-face schooling, the students craved a return to the traditions that had been seized from them. "The Christmas panto, the Wednesday morning anthem — I believe these were the primal sense of reassurance that normality is returning," she said. The survival of traditions through some of the most tumultuous moments of history — from the bombing of a part of the school during World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic — shows that "they are in the hearts and minds of the students. For me, those traditions have earned their place in our modern experience."



Cheltenham Ladies' College pupils enjoying the outdoor gardens CLC

## Shared intercontinental vision

The college's relationship with Japan dates back to the 19th century, a time when women's education was still a radical concept. Under the stewardship of Dorothea Beale ("Miss Beale"), principal from 1858 until the day she died in 1906, the school became a symbol of female empowerment. Beale's influence extended far beyond British borders, reaching reformers like Utako Shimoda and Umeko Tsuda, who were likewise instrumental in establishing the foundations for women's education in Japan.

In the 1890s, Shimoda and Tsuda both visited Cheltenham Ladies' College as part of a Japanese government initiative to study Western practices regarding women's education. CLC Archivist Georgina Robinson showed one of several volumes of letters entitled "Letters to Miss Beale from Famous People" in which exchanges between Beale and her Japanese counterparts are included. One letter from Tsuda thanked Beale for her hospitality and tour of the college. She wrote that "it is indeed a wonderful institution and a living symbol of the progress of our women during the

last 30 or 40 years. May we in Japan do as much in the coming ones." After returning to Japan, Tsuda founded the famous Tsuda University, inspired by what she witnessed while abroad.

Beale's correspondence with these Japanese reformers was more than just an exchange of letters. It was a dialogue about inclusivity and the future of women's roles in global society. "When you consider the existing asymmetry of the genders in virtually every country, the work is not finished," Jardine-Young averred. "We're not just forward-looking for the sake of it. It is about our shared endeavor to try and build a more open and inclusive set of opportunities for our children."

Cheltenham's influence persists in Japan today through ongoing partnerships with sister schools. The college hosts a summer school program for students from five Japanese girls schools in which they spend two weeks in Cheltenham, visit Stratford-upon-Avon — the birthplace of Shakespeare — and become members of CLC's flourishing international community.

## Encouraging women in STEM

When it comes to women's education, the relatively low number of women in STEM fields is a constant point of concern. CLC strives to provide a holistic education that includes these topics, pushing against gender stereotypes since its founding days. "Our founders — four fathers of daughters — were united in their determination to create a more equitable beginning," Jardine-Young noted. "They asked, 'Why can't our daughters study maths and science?'" and set out to "educate their minds" regardless of barriers to entering the workforce.

At Cheltenham, things are different. "It just doesn't occur to anyone here that they can't do anything. The most popular subject studied here is maths," Jardine-Young said, adding that students' interest in STEM persists into their upper-level studies even when the courses become optional. As evidenced in photographs taken as early as 1876 and up to the present day, the college has placed science and math "on equal footing" with other subjects despite there being historically a dearth of employment opportunities for women.

With a background in engineering, Jardine-Young believes that a solid foundation in the sciences provides invaluable skills regardless of where a student goes in life. "STEM forces zero tolerance for errors. When you take that into areas of more subjective thinking, it's good for your mind to have that discipline," she explained. She drew a comparison to her mother, who can play the piano by ear but never acquired the ability to read music. "She is so frustrated because she can only ever get to a certain ceiling," she said. Lacking a bottom-up analytical framework like STEM offers can severely limit a student's potential elsewhere.

## Preparing for uncertain future

"The further out in time you go, the less clear I am about the world we are trying to prepare students for," Jardine-Young said. Citing issues from the threat of climate change and the growth of divisive politics to the rapid rate of technological developments, she sees many challenges ahead. But amid the fog-shrouded future, she is hopeful that education and the younger generation can play a decisive role in designing better futures.

She believes that the students of "Gen C" — the COVID generation — may have



CLC's 11th principal, Eve Jardine-Young. CLC

acquired a resilience and skill set during the pandemic that will grow more apparent over time. "We haven't yet found our way to the language to describe the strengths of weathering COVID," she said. She is excited about what they will bring to the table when they become adults and the world is faced with another global crisis such as climate change. "They won't have the same set of assumptions that we have about what is possible, and their shared experience will inform their courage and their potential ability to collaborate."

Despite an unclear outlook, it is still the task of schools to prepare students as best they can, and in Jardine-Young's mind, Shakespeare said it best: "The readiness is all." Being paralyzed by uncertainty is unacceptable. "We have to get better at making decisions that are still thoughtful, but with imperfect information," she asserted. As for CLC's role, she endeavors for it to be "a place where we welcome girls with the potential and appetite to try, to be responsive, to be challenged, not to just be leaders, but to be capable of leadership — to understand the relational choreography that is not just all about 'me,' but also about followership and allyship."

One thing she is certain of, however, is the timelessness and importance of engaging with values central to humanity. She traced a direct line from Dorothea Beale and the school's legacy up to the present day. Beale "sat here with those Japanese guests, and they talked about the world — about love, family, justice, opportunity, happiness, striving and need. ... And those are the same values we're discussing today, and will also in the future."



Pupils at an art monoprinting lesson CLC