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Café Solar® Solar-Dried Coffee Enters Growing Market for Sustainably Produced Products

Café Solar® solar-dried coffee processed using renewable energy technology entered the market early this year. The high-quality coffee produced by organized small farmers who have transitioned to the alternative technology and shown their commitment to the environment by eliminating the use of fuel wood in drying their harvest.

Purchasing of Café Solar® supports the investment that these farmers have made in renewable energy technology and provides a boost to local manufacturing, as many of solar drying system components are manufactured in the Lowell area.

Café Solar® will be available in **Market Basket®** supermarkets this summer in Westford, Chelmsford, Lowell, and North Andover, Massachusetts; and Nashua and Londondary, New Hampshire.

Café Solar® is served at **UMASS Lowell** dining halls and cafeterias, and is sold at summer concert series events at the **Lowell National Historic Park**. The coffee is also available at **Life Alive Café**, 194 Middle Street, Lowell.

Café Solar® is also gaining popularity in Canada where it is sold under Environment Canada's official mark of environmental leadership "Environmental Choice." The verification and licensing criteria for the Environmental Choice program does not allow conventional drying equipment, which consumes wood and electricity in the drying process.

The following article is reproduced with permission from the UMASS, Lowell faculty publication "*The Shuttle*."

Solar-Dried Coffee Has Environmental Perks

If you had a cup of coffee this morning, you are most likely responsible for clearing a patch of rainforest about the size of your coffee mug. That's the amount of forest, in Latin America at least, that is cleared for the firewood necessary to dry the beans required for a cup of coffee.

If, however, you bought a cup of Café Solar® in one of the Umass Lowell dining halls, you probably had no impact on the rainforest at all.

Café Solar is a specialty coffee produced using a solar technology developed by the Lowell-based Mesoamerican Development Institute (MDI). MDI's founders, Umass Lowell engineering graduates, Richard Trubey '85 and Raúl Raudales '93 have developed a solar-powered, coffee-drying system that uses renewable energy technology, eliminating the need for the massive blast-furnace dryers typically used. The result is a high quality coffee that is both environmentally friendly and financially viable for farmers and consumers.

Each year in Latin America about 16,000 acres of forest are cut to fuel the fires that dry coffee beans, according to MDI. The traditional process requires tons of firewood or highly polluting diesel fuel. Nearly 84 percent of the energy required in coffee production is consumed during the drying.

With financial support from the World Bank and Global Environment Facility, Costa Rican coffee farmers are using MDI systems to conserve the forests and reduce costs. Further, MDI is working to help get the farmers' product to markets.

"The institute is developing designs to create the conditions for the technology to be available worldwide," says Raudales.

While the initial investment in the Solar Drying System is high relative to common alternatives, the systems use one-tenth the electricity of conventional dryers and significantly reduce labor costs.

Raudales and Trubey turned to Commonwealth Coffee, owned by Umass Lowell business alumnus Mark Howell '93 to market the product to consumers. Howell's Franklin-based company now roasts and markets Café Solar internationally.

One of the first customers of Café Solar is Aramark, the University's food service provider, which is now selling the Café Solar in many of the campus dining areas.

According to Aramark campus director Chris Monti, the price will be the same as other coffee sold on campus, making it more inviting for people to try something new.

"It will take us a few weeks before we know how much of the product we'll be purchasing on a regular basis," says Monti.

MDI will be dedicating a portion of the sales to fund graduate student research in the areas of trade, technology and the environment. The institute has previously provided funds for students of Prof. John Duffy, mechanical engineering, to travel to and work in Latin America.

Café Solar has Fair Trade and Organic certification. This ensures that the farmers are paid a fair price for their product, and that no chemicals or pesticides were used on the farms.

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