



World Championship Aspirations

BY ALFIE LAU

Sammy Piccolo is a man on a mission.

When the World Barista Championships are held in Atlanta, Georgia from April 16 to 19, the Burnaby North Secondary graduate hopes to improve on his three podium finishes and walk away with the crown as the world's top coffee artist.

Piccolo, who took a two-year-break from the competition, finished second in 2006 and 2004 and third in 2005, the only person to have three top-three finishes in three consecutive years.

"I can't lie, I want to win," said the manager of Caffé Artigiano, the stylish coffee shop at 4359 Hastings St. in North Burnaby. "I'm proud to have done as well as I have but winning would be a great achievement."

Sammy, along with his brothers Vince and Mike, have been involved in the coffee business for more than a decade. Vince and Sammy opened the first Caffé Artigiano in 2000 and after growing the business, they sold the chain to a former Earl's Restaurant executive.

Sammy remains the manager of the Heights location, while Vince runs the roasting business, 49th Parallel Coffee Roasters, and Mike is the master roaster. The roasting company supplies all the Caffé Artigiano locations with their own special coffees, sourced from all over the world.

"I think because of the real close relationship we have with coffee farms, we're able to bring in the best beans, which allows us to make the best coffee," said Sammy. "I think that's what makes us different and why you get such a unique coffee experience when you

come to our store."

Sammy said that while the most popular drinks are the traditional mochas, cappuccinos and espressos, he has one favourite above all others.

"I've tried many different single origin coffees and while they're all good, I love the Ethiopian Yergacheffe, which is even better if you use a French press, like I do at home," said Sammy. "The flavour is unbelievable."

And while great coffee beans make a great foundation for great coffee, what sets Sammy apart is his imagination.

For the 2008 Canadian Barista Championships held in Montreal, Sammy walked all over his competition with a special espresso blend that combined pear purée, rhubarb compote and blueberry cream.

"You have to be willing to try different things and have some humility," he said. "You have to be able to take criticism and continue improving. ...A little showmanship doesn't hurt either!"



Training each of his 19 employees personally, Sammy has high expectations: only when he is completely confident his employees are proficient in producing a superb cup of coffee will they be allowed to serve the public.

"Our reputation is very important," he said. "My wife's in the coffee business, my brothers are too. If we serve a bad cup of coffee, I'm going to hear about it. I'd like to think I'm my own toughest critic but I don't ever want to have my parents come and tell me one of their neighbours had a less-than-perfect cup of coffee from my place."



That eye for detail and never settling is what separates Caffé Artigiano from its competitors.

In fact, one of the most loyal customers is the top cop in the Heights, Staff Sgt. Regina Lyons.

"I love to start my day with a coffee from Caffé Artigiano," said Lyons. "It's really marvellous what they do there and it's a great business to have in the Heights."

People who want to try Sammy's handiwork are often offered "cuppings", the coffee equivalent of a wine tasting, because Sammy wants people to be exposed to new and different coffees.

"I love coffee and I want to share that with all my customers," he said. "I love competing to be the best in Canada or the world but in the end, I just love serving great coffee to my customers."

The Burnaby location of Caffé Artigiano is located at 4359 Hastings St. It is open seven days a week, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Wednesday, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Saturday and 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Sunday. For more information, call 604-473-2180 or go to www.caffeartigiano.com.