

# Fair trade group helps convince La Pêche to smell the coffee



MARK ANDERSON

That granola-crunching sound emanating from the little town of Wakefield, a half-hour north of Ottawa on the banks of the Gatineau River, is about to get a lot louder. A little more than a week from now, on Nov. 9, the sprawling municipality of La Pêche (of which Wakefield is the undisputed centrepiece), will unveil

its new identity as Canada's second official "Fair Trade Town," following in the footsteps of Wolfville, N.S.

"We've always been pretty crunchy," admits Anne Winship, owner of Wakefield's Bean Fair Coffee, and the driving force behind the official designation (La Pêche municipal council voted to ratify the Fair Trade Town moniker in September, and to purchase naught but fair trade coffee and snacks for its sundry meetings and events). "A lot of our businesses already sold fair trade goods, so it wasn't that much of a stretch to get the rest of the town on board."

Wakefield has a well-earned

reputation as a hotbed of social awareness and environmental activism. For example, it's the only place I know where you can walk into a restaurant (Le Souppçon), and pay \$15 for a \$14 bowl of Thai noodles: An extra dollar is levied on all meals, to cover the cost of the restaurant's commitment to serving only are grown or raised food. Says Souppçon proprietor Tanya Skeates: "Of course, we could just raise the prices on the menu to \$15, but what would be the point of that? The idea is to raise awareness, to get people thinking about the value of locally produced food."

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MARTIN COMEAU

Anne Winship, owner of Wakefield's Bean Fair Coffee Bean, borrows a burro to illustrate the Quebec municipality of La Pêche's decision to become a 'Fair Trade Town.'

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Likewise, Wakefield's designation as a Fair Trade Town is largely symbolic. It means, among other things, that La Pêche agrees to encourage access to fair trade-certified products in the community, and increase education and public awareness about fair trade and sustainable consumption.

Beyond the feel-good rhetoric, however, are real results. The fair trade movement, which has been quietly percolating for a half-century, is helping agricultural workers and manufacturers earn living wages in some of the world's poorest regions.

The concept is fairly simple: Instead of paying market prices for Third World commodities and manufactured goods, fair trade organizations agree to pay above-market prices, in order to ensure workers a reasonable standard of living, and also promote environmentally sustainable practices. Of course, that means the fair traders must then pass this additional cost on to consumers, which they

the goals of the fair trade movement is not only to afford workers a living wage, but to increase economic stability.

"In the coffee market, for example, small changes in world supply can result in huge price fluctuations. When prices drop below the cost of production, it leads to a host of ills, including increased poverty, mass migration to cities, and in some cases a shift to illegal crops."

Fair trade mediates the problem by negotiating set prices for commodities and manufactured goods, prices that won't fluctuate with the market but stay in effect for the duration of the contract.

Another complaint is that, while fair trade organizations set prices for the purchase of Third World goods, no one regulates the price at which those products can be re-sold in First World outlets. In other words, when you agree to pay an extra \$5 for a half-kilo of fair trade coffee, only some of that \$5 is going to support the producers, the rest is taken in profit by the retailer.

do in the form of higher-than-market prices for a kilo of coffee or a fair trade chocolate bar.

Given the fact fair trade sales in Canada have been more than doubling every two years (62 per cent growth last year alone, according to TransFair Canada, the industry's certification and audit body) it's a price more and more consumers appear willing to pay.

"There's been a huge amount of interest and growth," confirms the fancifully named Reykia Fick, TransFair Canada's outreach co-ordinator. "It's part of a broader movement of people looking for sustainable and ethical alternatives to run-of-the-mill consumerism, a concrete way for people to address global issues of poverty, environmental degradation and global trading practices."

There are sceptics and detractors. Some argue that fair trade is a form of subsidy, and as such breeds dependence rather than self-reliance. Others go further, suggesting that fair trade organizations actually do long-term damage by perpetuating the oversupply of various commodities — encouraging people to continue planting and harvesting coffee, say, when prices are so low they have to be artificially boosted in order for coffee growers to survive.

Of course, a large portion of First World agriculture is also subsidized in one way or another. Moreover, as Ms. Fick points out, one of

That doesn't sit right with some folk, who bridle at the thought of Canadian retailers profiting from the charitable impulses of fair trade shoppers. It's a minor, and increasingly moot point. If there was a period when retailers could use the fair trade logo to inflate their own profit margins, it's rapidly coming to a close as fair trade products begin to compete not only against regular market goods, but against other fair trade products. Today, the socially minded java drinker has a choice of which fair trade coffee he or she wants to purchase, from which coffeehouse.

None of these quibbles matter to Anne Winship, anyway. She's busy selling fair trade coffee at Bean Fair, and when she gets hungry she nips out to the Wakefield bakery for a pastry made with fair trade chocolate, or to the local candy maker for a sweet made with fair trade sugar.

Needless to say, you can get a lot done when you're hopped up on caffeine, cocoa and sugar. Thus, in addition to running her coffee shop, she and the rest of her fair trade steering committee are busy organizing a week-long celebration beginning Nov. 3, and ending with an official launch party Nov. 9 at the Black Sheep Inn. Oh, and she also found time to borrow a neighbour's mule for an updated Juan Valdez fair trade photo shoot.

Borrow a mule? Only in Wakefield.