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Portland Roasting Co. managing partner Mark Stell works with growers to improve the quantity and quality of their beans, which, in turn, helps his business.

Portland Roasting Co.

Brilliant Innovations

Coffee trader goes to source, forges ties with sustainable growers

By **AMANDA WALDROUPE**
for Pamplin Media Group

Cracking a freshly roasted coffee bean in his hand and holding it close to his nose, Mark Stell inhales.

"Smell that fruity smell?" he asks. "That's fresh coffee."

Stell knows good coffee — as the managing partner of Portland Roasting Co., which he founded in 1996, Stell has been roasting high-quality specialty coffee and espresso for the past 12 years. But Portland Roasting is more than just coffee.

"It's coffee with a sustain-

able focus," Stell says.

Managing a carbon neutral company that composts isn't enough for Stell. So he travels to different parts of the world at least once every other month to visit the coffee farms that supply his company. On these trips, he works with farmers to improve the quality and quantity of their yield.

The farms Portland Roasting works with are small — 100 acres or less. Stell calls them "diamonds in the rough," farms in rough shape but with potential for yield development.

"A lot of growers don't know what their coffee tastes

like," Stell says. "Growing and processing coffee are two totally different things."

One key to Portland Roasting's success is its Farm Friendly Direct Program, which focuses on creating long-term partnerships with coffee growers. The program also works with growers to establish fair prices for green coffee. Stell says Portland Roasting typically pays farmers 30 percent to 40 percent above fair trade prices, plus a premium.

The premium usually is a community assistance program — such as tree planting, water conservation projects, building schools or paying

teachers' salaries. Stell says the community assistance projects are a vital part of making better coffee, because people's lives and communities are improved.

"You don't necessarily have to do these things for business," Stell says. "But it really does make a difference."

Stell's advice to other idealists?

"Go to the source," he says.

Personal involvement with growers and understanding their needs is a win-win for both business partners. "It's not just about the money, but about doing the right thing," Stell says.