

An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

A Delicate Balance



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A snack attack from Route 11

BY DON HARRISON

Special to *The Washington Post*

• Originally Published March 23, 2014

MOUNT JACKSON, Va. — Being a small fry can have its advantages. Take the Route 11 brand of sweet potato chips. The snack-food giants — Frito-Lay and such — haven't taken up the challenge of this more fragile of the tubers, which tends to caramelize and burn during mass production.

But for a snack food maker that's used to taking its time, this is a sweet and profitable niche.

Welcome to the world of Route 11 Potato Chips, a small Virginia chipper in the rustic Shenandoah that has been cooking up Kettle-style cult favorites for more than 20 years.

Today, the crew at its industrial plant in Mount Jackson is busy churning out 600 pounds an hour of sweet potatoes. They are grown on the Eastern Shore, slow cooked in a mixture of peanut and sunflower oils and lightly seasoned with unrefined salt from an ancient Utah salt bed.

The company touts the chip's other virtues: non-GMO certified, nutritious and tasty.

"Our focus, from day one, was to make a potato chip that's just better than the rest," says Sarah Cohen, Route 11's owner. "We're making



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Sarah Cohen is the owner of Route 11 Potato Chips, and Michael Connelly is the company's vice president and engineer. "We're making the same exact potato chip that we started with 20 years ago," Cohen says. "When we started, we were a 60-pound-per-hour producer." Now the company is a 600-pound-per-hour producer.

the same exact potato chip that we started with 20 years ago. When we started, we were a 60-pound-per-hour producer. When we came here, we made it to 600 pounds an hour. We know we're small. Frito-Lay is like 600,000 pounds an hour."

Indeed, she's up against some salty competition — and a long history.

As legend has it, the potato chip emerged in 1853 from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where a chef named George Crum at Moon's Lake House — having endured a patron's criticism that his french fries were cut too thick — first fried up a batch of thinly sliced potatoes. Today, Crum's retort is the nation's No.

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1 snack food. Americans spend \$9 billion a year on potato chips, according to the Snack Food Association.

Frito-Lay, based in Texas, dominates the market, but smaller companies — Route 11, Utz, Martin's Potato Chips and Zapp's — hold their own by catering to regional tastes.

Potato chip companies are expected to offer barbeque, salt and vinegar, and sour cream and chive flavors, Cohen says. Route 11 makes all of those and more: dill pickle, Mama Zuma's Revenge and, in a nod to local palates, Chesapeake crab. Cohen and staff collaborate with a seasoning company to develop the flavors.

Not every variety is a hit. Slow sellers garlic and herb and green chile enchilada were abandoned. A line of veggie chips also was dropped.

"It's like having to put a dog down," Cohen says. "And I have to hear about it every day from people who loved those chips."

The successful varieties can really take off — and land in some interesting places.

Chef José Andrés created "Tortilla al Estilo Route 11," an adaptation of his mentor's omelet at the famed El Bulli in Spain. In it, Andrés uses Route 11's lightly salted chips.

Ben & Jerry's partnered with the company last summer for a promotional ice cream flavor called Capitol Chill, which featured the sweet potato chips as a garnish.

"Route 11 Potato Chips was chosen because they make a hell of a product

and do so in a very thoughtful way," said Sean Greenwood, a Ben & Jerry's spokesman, noting that their sustainable practices were considered a big plus. "And when we paired their sweet potato chip with our chocolate base, our flavor gurus said, 'Sweeeeet!'"

Hipster chipsters are also impressed — the magician Penn Jillette, of Penn & Teller fame, told *Maxim* magazine that the fiery hot Mama Zuma's Revenge was one of the greatest things to ever destroy his mouth.

Cohen, a youngish 49, is grateful



JAHÍ CHIKWENDIU/THE WASHINGTON POST

Potatoes move through a machine as they begin the first stage of becoming potato chips.



JAHÍ CHIKWENDIU/THE WASHINGTON POST

Fidencio Jose washes and inspects freshly peeled potatoes.

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for the publicity.

“We don’t have a budget to sell the brand. It’s mainly word of mouth,” she says. Still, with more than 1,000 accounts it sells to, Route 11 satisfies “the most loyal customers in the world.”

Cohen doesn’t have an office, so she greets visitors at a picnic table

inside her facility’s open-air retail showroom, where a three-pound tub of Sour Cream N Chive chips goes for \$34.

Here, walk-in customers can watch the whole process, from the potato cutting to the old-fashioned cooking in a kettle. Then the chips are hand sorted, salted and seasoned. At the

end, they are sealed up in Route 11’s kitschy and colorful bags — all in about 12 minutes.

“We want people to see how their food is made,” Cohen says.

“There’s still a lot of hands-on in our operation,” says Michael Connelly, Cohen’s business partner. “A little less automation. We’re a lot more like a cook in the kitchen.”

Visitors can get samples — from the best-selling lightly salted chips to the dill pickle, an instant hit in 2011 when the hosts of NBC’s *Today* went crazy over it on the air. Oprah Winfrey’s *O magazine* gave Route 11’s chips a shout-out, too.

“Being picked on the *Today* show saw the most volume we’ve ever had,” Cohen says. “It was a tidal wave of dill pickle. I think pickles have had a renaissance in the food world, and I’ve always loved them.”

To counter the success of regional companies, Frito-Lay has expanded, too, selling Mediterranean-inspired flavors under the Olive Coast brand and its own version of dill pickle.

“Cohen’s slant on kettle chips is truly a ‘post-modern’ approach,” Dirk Burhans writes in his book *Crunch!: A History of the Great American Potato Chip*. “Route 11’s product occupies simultaneous niches in the gourmet and health food worlds, while using packing and flavors that evoke a whacked-out twist on the mom-and-pop chip paradigm.”

An intriguing start

How did Route 11 land on the map?



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Automated rakes stir chips in one of two kettles during the cooking process. One hundred pounds of potatoes turn into 25 pounds of chips after the water from the vegetable becomes steam during cooking.



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Ezequiel Vicente inspects and hand-seasons freshly cooked kettle chips.

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“Our fate is wedded to a *Washington Post* classified ad and a bad cocaine deal,” Cohen says, intriguingly.

The story begins at the Tabard Inn, the venerable 91-year-old Dupont Circle restaurant and bar that Cohen’s parents, Edward and Fritzi, bought in 1975. The Cohens also ran a farm in the Shenandoah Valley — the second in Virginia to be certified organic — and it grew produce for the Tabard Inn and other D.C. restaurants. Cohen describes her father, who died in 1999, as something of a visionary when it came to organic farming. “His interest was in where the food comes from,” she says. “This is back in the early ’80s — nobody really got it.”

The family journey into chipperiness began when a neighboring farmer, who also grew organically, had an unusual problem. As Cohen tells the story: “He told my dad that he had been contracted by a pair of brothers to grow a crop of potatoes and that the brothers had been convicted of dealing cocaine and put in jail for ten years. The grower was like, ‘What am I going to do? I’ve just put these potatoes in the ground.’ My dad said, ‘Why don’t we make an organic potato chip?’”

They called it Tabard Farm Potato Chips — Route 11 still sells them when Yukon Gold potatoes are in season — and a little sideline business was born.

“My dad went out and got packaging designs. He found a co-packer. And by the time the



JAHU CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST

A machine weighs a bag's worth of chips to the gram before moving the chips to be bagged. The machine will allow bags of chips to weigh slightly over the targeted amount but will not allow any bags to be underfilled.

potatoes were ready to dig up, everything was set up. He and my mother, on foot, started trying to sell these potato chips around D.C. and New York, and they actually got a lot of interest.”

Edward and Fritzi had their boutique chips packed in a Mennonite factory in Pennsylvania for a few years. Then “they saw in a *Washington Post* classified ad that there was a small potato chip factory for sale in Southern Maryland,” Cohen says. “It was this little start-up plant, called Chesapeake Chips.” They bought it.

Cohen, then a budding filmmaker, admits to rolling her eyes at her parents’ “potato chip thing.”

But her mother had sold 6,000 tubs of chips to Williams-Sonoma, and they would need her help to fill the order. She went to Waldorf and pitched in. The order “was well-received,” she says.

And with that she was rooted in the family potato chip business. It didn’t take long for Cohen and the factory’s chipper, Chris Miller, to realize that they couldn’t make it in Southern Maryland.

They looked to the Shenandoah Valley. “I was familiar with the area because of our farm and it was right along an Interstate,” Cohen says.

In 1992, the company moved into a 3,200-square-foot feed store in Middletown, Va., and the chips were renamed Route 11.

At a time when potato chips were vilified as a leading cause of obesity, an all-natural, additive-free option became attractive. The brand soon became a fixture in specialty markets and health food shops; the Marriott chain was an early client. But the operation was too small to compete with fellow vendors at trade shows.

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“We were producing 60 pounds of chips an hour, which was as low as you can go and not be producing them in your house,” she says. “We had someone with a rake stirring the chips.”

Upgrading the facilities

The game changer for Route 11, Cohen says, was meeting her current business partner, Connelly, who came aboard in 2002 after the company’s resident “chip-meister,” Chris Miller, left to start a catering company — “Chris was integral to the growth of Route 11,” she says. He died in 2007, the same year Sarah bought out her parents’ stake.

Connelly, 47, is an ex-Army intelligence officer who is “maniacal about cleanliness and standard operation procedure,” she says.

“Mechanics and building are my background,” the Fairfax High graduate says. Connelly was solving production problems for a T-shirt company when he befriended Cohen and gave her a reality check. “Everyone else said, ‘Oh, it’s cute and kitschy and fun,’ but the facility was teetering on falling apart.”

“Sarah had a wonderful product and customer relations, but she had no technical background,” he said. “So I helped her rebuild every piece of equipment in the old factory.”

Looking to expand, the company moved to the hamlet of Mount Jackson in 2008.

“We were small and potato chips are really consumable,” Cohen says. “There was a lot of business that we couldn’t go after because our capacity was so limited. Our

equipment was old, really fatigued and ready to break down. It was a big investment to go forward.”

“He and I designed this building ourselves,” Cohen says, calling the \$4 million relocation an intense process. “Most of the equipment is custom made; some we fabricated ourselves. It’s about as do-it-yourself as you can get.”

Route 11 now has 34 people handling production, warehousing and sales.

Enough staff and space, that is, to branch out beyond specialty shops and its robust mail-order business and into grocery stores — like Whole Foods, Wegmans and selected Martin’s and Giant branches. The company works mostly with independent distributors. Often they don’t know where the chips are actually placed. Connelly says he’s had Route 11 chips pictures texted from friends and family as far away as California.

The Route 11 vice president and co-owner is committed to making Route 11 a 100 percent waste-free facility, making for some happy farm animals. Valley-area bovines chow down on peelings and cooked chips that aren’t quite up to snuff — yes, they call them cow chips. The factory’s excess cooking oil has been used to season horse feed and sold as biodiesel fuel.

Cohen won’t disclose Route 11’s annual revenue but says that the privately held company made about \$4 million in sales last year. You might think that potato chipping is a relatively easy proposition — just oil, salt, seasoning and spuds,

right? — but a lot of factors can make or break a small snack-food enterprise.

The nearly 5 million pounds of chipping potatoes that Route 11 cooks up each year aren’t your basic Russets. “They are bred to be as dense as possible,” Cohen says. “They’re not the kind of potatoes you’d find in a grocery store — you’d be disappointed if you tried to bake one.”

“This year has been one of the best potato crops in years, but every year is different,” she says. “Floods can wipe out fields. There have been some bad years.”

Cohen often wonders if making potato chips is what she wants to do with her life.

In 2002, Cohen co-directed *Oyster Guanaca*, a stylish black-and-white movie filmed at the Tabard Inn that won an award at the first Slow Food Festival in Italy.

“I would like to make enough money to finance another film,” she says. “Just a short film. I haven’t given up on it, but I’ve put in on the back burner because making potato chips is such an intense endeavor.”

TO VISIT THE PHOTO GALLERY

http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/how-route-11-potato-chips-come-to-be/2014/03/21/cfa595e8-b102-11e3-9627-c65021d6d572_gallery.html#item

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Route 11 Chips Business

1. Route 11 began business as an unexpected opportunity. Summarize each step from inception to expansion.
 - A. Shenandoah Valley farm
 - B. Pennsylvania Mennonite factory
 - C. *The Washington Post* classified ad
 - D. Middleton, Va., feed store
2. A food manufacturer needs corporate customers to succeed. Which firms have bought and sold Route 11 Chips?
3. Business owners hope for a good partnership. Give an example of a successful partnership of Sarah Cohen. Why is it successful?
4. How has Route 11 managed to become a waste-free business?
5. Do the math.
 - A. In 1994 Route 11 processed 60 pounds of potatoes per hour. By 2014, it processed 600 pounds per hour. What is the percent of increase?
 - B. How much larger is the Frito-Lay production?
 - C. How old is the American potato chip?
6. The smaller companies that produce potato chips survive by “catering to regional tastes.” Explain what this business practice means.

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7. List five steps in the right order in the potato chip-making process.
- A.
 - B.
 - C.
 - D.
 - E.
8. What is an independent distributor?
9. “A lot of factors can make or break a small snack-food enterprise,” states writer Don Harrison. What science and environmental factors are involved in this product’s quality?
10. “We don’t have a budget to sell the brand. It’s mainly word of mouth,” Sarah Cohen stated. Who have been some of the company’s celebrity endorsements? Why are these significant to different demographics?
11. What insight into big business do you gain from learning that Frito-Lay sells “Mediterranean-inspired flavors under the Olive Coast brand”?
12. If you opened a “food business,” what would you sell? Would you have an international, ethnic or regional theme? Would you want a mom-and-pop eat-in, food truck or fast-food product? Be sure to include the senses as you describe your product.

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Biologists worried by starving migratory birds, seen as tied to climate change

By Darryl Fears

• *Originally Published June 19, 2013*

At the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, the tiny bodies of Arctic tern chicks have piled up. Over the past few years, biologists have counted thousands that starved to death because the herring their parents feed them have vanished.

Puffins are also having trouble feeding their chicks, which weigh less than previous broods. When the parents leave the chicks to fend for themselves, the young birds are failing to find food, and hundreds are washing up dead on the Atlantic coast.

What's happening to migratory seabirds? Biologists are worried about a twofold problem: Commercial fishing is reducing their food source, and climate change is causing fish to seek colder waters, according to a bulletin released Tuesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We've seen a 40 percent decline of Arctic terns in the last 10 years," said Linda Welch, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist at the refuge. Arctic tern pairs in Maine have fallen from 4,224 pairs in 2008 to 2,467 pairs last year, the Fish and Wildlife Service said.

Biologists at the Maine refuge are not sure whether herring sought colder waters elsewhere or went deeper, but they are no longer on the surface, from which Arctic terns pluck them. While other birds can dive deep for food, Arctic terns cannot.

"They're not getting herring, so they bring butterfish that the chicks can't swallow," Welch said. "So they starve to death. You have thousands and thousands of chicks dying. It's very sad."

On the Machias Seal Island, the largest tern colony on the refuge's 50 islands, a shortage of fish prompted

3,000 pairs to abandon their nests in 2007. "They haven't raised any chicks since," Welch said.

Arctic terns arrive at the Maine islands after a month of flying from the Antarctic, about 470 miles a day — 14,000 total — low on energy, longing for a bite. If they lack food and energy, "they can't keep the gulls off them," Welch said. Gulls eat terns.

In the past two years, Welch said, biologists at the refuge went to the most productive foraging grounds where seabirds, whales and dolphin prey on herring, and spotted fishing trawlers.

"When [the trawlers] come out, the whales and birds disappear, and you don't see them again," Welch said. "I think it's hard to deny that they don't have an effect on these birds."

Recently the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council lowered the amount of herring and shad that trawlers can take next year in an effort to save the species. The effect on seabirds was not a prominent factor in that decision.

Migratory birds "are among the most vulnerable groups of species to climate change," said Doug Inkley, a senior scientist for the National Wildlife Federation who studies them. "Migratory birds need suitable areas to breed when they're migrating and on their wintering grounds. Through climate change, if you affect any of these habitats, you've broken a link in the chain. That puts the species in peril."

Climate change also threatens a shorebird, the red knot. As temperatures warm, they are leaving the southern tip of Brazil later for a 9,000-mile journey back to their Arctic breeding ground. Timing is key, because red knots might miss the peak of Delaware's horseshoe crab spawn, where they gorge themselves on eggs and double their weight.

"From backyard wildlife watchers to hunters in their duck blinds, unless we take action now, Americans across the country are going to be asking, 'What happened to all the birds?'" Alan Wentz, a retired chief

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conservation officer of Ducks Unlimited, said in an NWF report, “Shifting Skies: Migratory Birds in a Warming World.”

Past events foreshadow the fate of red knots that fail to eat enough horseshoe crab eggs before the long trip north. For years in the 1990s, horseshoe crabs were overfished as bait for shellfish.

As the horseshoe crab went, so went the red knot. By 2000, a population of about 100,000 had fallen to about 44,000, a stunning decrease, said Gregory Breese, a supervisory fish and wildlife biologist for the Delaware Bay Estuary Project office. Estimates based on other counts vary but still show a major decline.

For the Arctic tern, the future is just as cloudy in an era of climate change. Fish and other sea life that crave colder water have been swimming to the Earth’s poles, abandoning areas like the warming Gulf of Maine.

In research published in the journal *Nature*, University of British Columbia scientists found that 968 species of fish and invertebrates they studied fled from the warming waters of their original habitats.

Male and female terns are thought to pair and mate for life. The females generally lay two eggs. When they hatch after 21 days, the parents search for food to feed their chicks 14 hours a day. The primary food is herring.

It is not known how puffins get to Maine; living out at sea makes them hard to study. But, like terns, they dine on herring. And when they cannot find herring, they bring their chicks the larger butterfish.

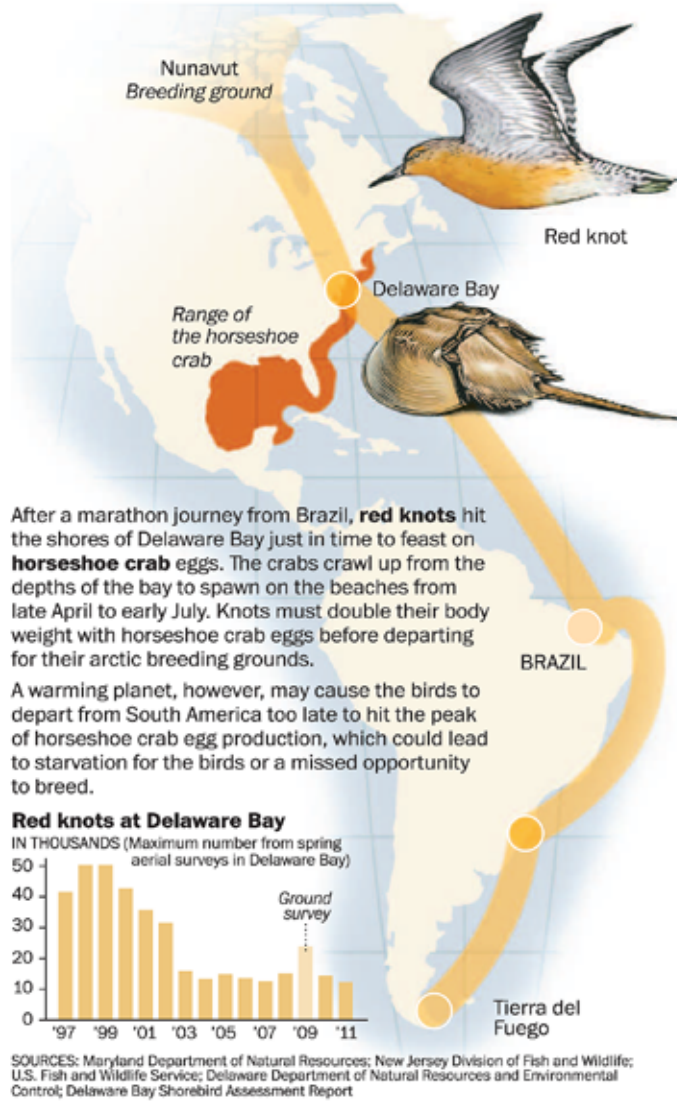
Numbers of puffin pairs have increased slightly in recent years, Welch said, but their chicks are smaller and weigh less than before. “What will happen in five years when they come back” mature and ready to mate, she wondered.

If they make it back at all.

“We know the puffin go out to sea, but we really don’t know where they go. We don’t know the migratory behavior of puffin,” Welch said. “But in January through April this year, hundreds of birds

Existence by delicate timing

Global warming upsets conditions that have evolved to connect migrating birds with the food that they depend upon for survival.



THE WASHINGTON POST

washed up dead from Maine to Florida. The birds they found, many of them had starved to death.”

It was a rare event. Few birds ever wash ashore; usually they sink at sea. “We think last year was a particularly bad year. Maybe this year will be better.”



A Delicate Balance

“What’s happening to migratory seabirds? Biologists are worried about a twofold problem: Commercial fishing is reducing their food source, and climate change is causing fish to seek colder waters,” according to a June 2013 bulletin released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Read “Biologists worried by food shortage among birds.” Answer the questions and fill in the chart below based on the information provided in Darryl Fears’ 2013 article and the accompanying informational graphic.

1. How might global warming affect the life cycle of a red knot?
2. What impact on humans would the extinction of seabirds and fish have?
3. In the chart, summarize information about conditions challenging the survival of each bird and fish. In the fourth column, add a possible solution to the problem.

BIRDS & FISH	Commercial Fishing	Climate Change	Solutions
Arctic tern			
Gulls			
Herring			
Puffin			
Shad			



Conduct an e-Replica search. Select a bird or fish from the article. Search to find an update on the species. Write a science news article to inform readers. Use information from 2013 to compare and contrast conditions.

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Peeking behind the veil of Starbucks's \$7 coffee

BY TIM CARMAN

• *Originally Published November 29, 2012*

The news that Starbucks introduced a \$7 cup of coffee to select stores in the Pacific Northwest has generated the kind of buzz usually reserved for military sex scandals and Costco openings. It's understandable, though Power-hungry Washingtonians have always been fascinated by rare and expensive things that we cannot possess, and everyone, no matter where they live, has a hard time comprehending a medium-size cup of Joe that costs roughly the same as a 34-ounce container of Folgers at Wal-mart.

Which is why I called Joel Finkelstein, the owner and master roaster behind Qualia Coffee in Petworth. The guy knows his specialty coffees, right down to the Equatorial farms where they are grown.

Finkelstein tells All We Can Eat that the Geisha heritage varietal, the bean responsible for Starbucks's

pricey Costa Rica Finca Palmilera coffee, can trace its roots back to Ethiopia, often considered the birthplace of coffee. Many decades ago, the Geisha tree was brought to Panama, where it had been one of several varietals quietly cultivated at Hacienda la Esmeralda. Sometime in the early 2000s, Finkelstein says, the Esmeralda farmer apparently realized these beans were a rare and delicate thing.

The Geisha coffee craze started not long afterward.

Since about 2004, Geisha beans have fetched increasingly higher prices at auction, reaching \$170 a pound in 2010, according to this *New York Times* report. But the prices have dropped sharply in recent years, in part because la Esmeralda started selling Geisha seeds to farmers throughout Central America, Finkelstein notes.

"They're growing Geisha varietal coffee trees all up and down Central America," Finkelstein says. "It's still fairly new, because it's only been recently introduced to these countries."

A Starbucks spokesperson told Bloomberg that stores are selling

the Geisha beans for \$40 per half-pound, which seems a fair price. Both Finkelstein and *The Times* note that Geisha lots, generally speaking, now sell in the \$40-per-pound range, though some have been as low as \$29 a pound. That's significantly more expensive than the \$4 per pound that Finkelstein pays on average for his green coffee beans. (His average price per cup at Qualia is \$2.50.)

Regardless, as Finkelstein says, "The [Geisha] price is not based on the quality of the beans." It's based on the scarcity of the supply.

Finkelstein says he sampled Geisha coffee years ago, but found that the flavors "were not extraordinary." He remembers distinct floral notes and the flavor of chocolate.

The Qualia roaster has doubts that Starbucks will have the capacity or time to treat the Geisha beans right. The coffee giant tends to roast in large batches that value volume over quality, Finkelstein says. Plus, he suspects those expensive beans will not be at their prime once they reach the 46 stores where they are currently available (even though the locations are all in the

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same geographic area and could ostensibly be roasted and quickly shipped to the shops).

“Their production chain is so long, it’s not going to be fresh,” he says.

Well, it seems that Starbucks can be more nimble when it wants to be. The Geisha beans, purchased from La Candelia Estates in Costa Rica, are “small batch roasted” right “in our back yard,” says Starbucks spokeswoman Alisa Martinez.

“This is such an exquisite coffee, you want to do it justice,” Martinez adds. “We determined that the best way to roast this coffee was to use a lighter roast” than the typical dark-roasted coffees at Starbucks.

Martinez is not sure how fast the beans, once roasted, make it to stores, but she thought they were “delivered pretty quickly.” One thing is for certain, though: Starbucks does not have enough of the Geisha beans to satisfy coffee drinkers coast to coast. The company has only 3,800 pounds of the green beans, which



PHOTODISC

is the total amount harvested at La Candelia, Martinez says.

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone,” she adds. Starbucks does hope to find other farmers who can sell the chain more Geisha beans.

To get a better sense of how the Starbucks’s Costa Rica Finca Palmilera tastes, I reached out to Hanna Raskin, the award-winning food writer and critic for the *Seattle Weekly*. She promptly informed me that she’s not a coffee drinker, but quickly offered up colleagues at her

paper to sample the java for All We Can Eat.

“According to our managing editor and editorial assistant, both veteran coffee drinkers, ‘it’s good,’” Raskin e-mails. “They felt it was mellow and detected a few chocolaty notes. As I said, I’m no coffee drinker, but I picked up almond on the nose.

“The coffee experts agreed the coffee was reminiscent of a Stumptown roast, saying it was sour where most coffees are bitter. Neither of them wanted to pay \$7 for it (although, being Seattle, they wondered whether the price was inflated because the farmers were being paid more fairly),” Raskin added. “They’re both satisfied with standard Starbucks coffee.”

ABOUT THE BLOG

All We Can Eat is a meeting place for the food-obsessed, a traffic signal at the ever-crowded intersection of politics, culture, aesthetics, desire and the dinner plate.