

by  
Chris Ryan

Characters  
**IN COFFEE**

**DR. JOSEPH JOHN'S**  
journey from rocket science  
to coffee chemistry

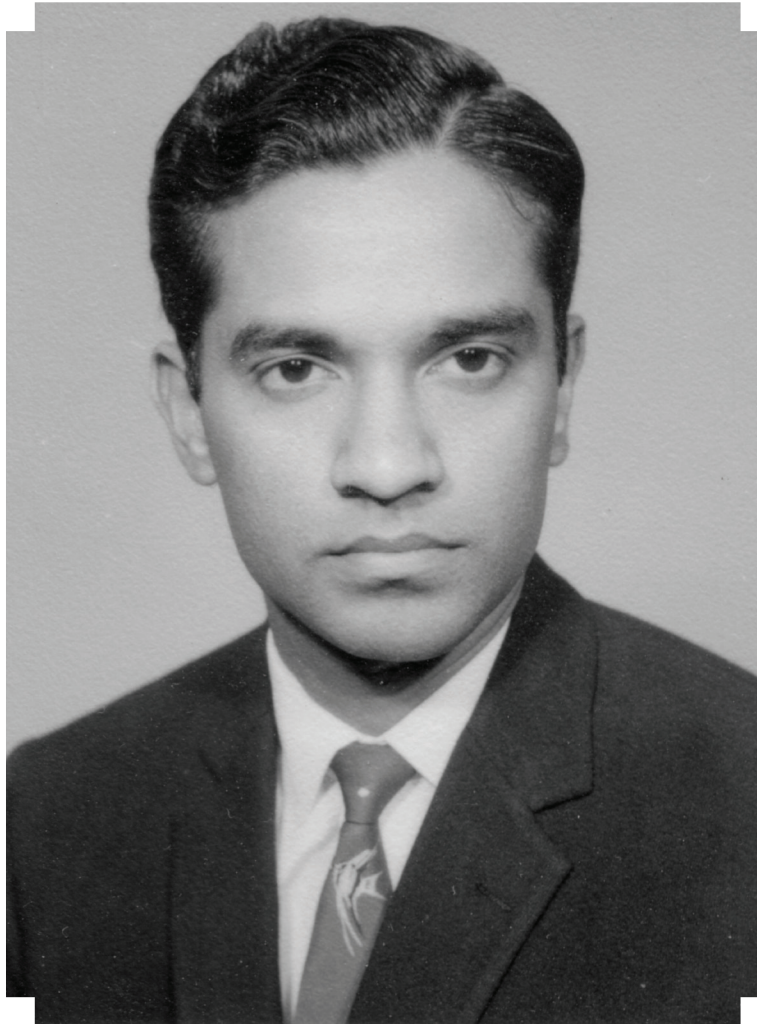
**T**o most people, the name Dr. John conjures up the New Orleans-based pianist, an integral part of America's rock 'n' roll scene since the 1960s. But to those in specialty coffee, there's another Dr. John: an unmistakable figure and trade show mainstay who for 20 years has been happy to preach the gospel of espresso to any interested party.

Joseph John—born in 1938 in Southern India's Tamil Nadu—did not always have a coffee career. Trained in nuclear physics at universities in India, Sri Lanka and the United States, John worked in that field for several decades before unexpectedly finding himself with an opportunity to enter the coffee world. It was a family friend from India who lured him into the industry two decades ago, and the Menlo Park, Calif.-based John has continued to deal exclusively in Indian coffees. He says two-thirds of the business done by his company, Josuma Coffee, comes from importing green coffee, while the other third is covered by the roasting side of the operation. Over the course of his coffee career, Dr. John also has served as an unofficial advisor to the Coffee Board of India in its pursuit of growing Indian coffee's market share in the United States.

Dr. John sat down with *Fresh Cup* for a lengthy telephone interview in which he talked about his scientific background, why robusta gets a bad rap, the challenges of balancing importing and roasting, and much more.

**Q:** First things first: What's your background?  
**A:** My parents came from Kerala, and I was born in a city called Madurai in Tamil Nadu. I was born in American Mission Hospital because my father taught at American

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**RARE QUALIFICATIONS:** Dr. Joseph John earned his masters in physics in 1958 at age 20 and began working for India's atomic energy program.

College in Madurai. We lived there until I was about seven years old, and then we moved to Sri Lanka because my father got a job as head of the physics department at a university there. I was always a good student, and I jumped from third grade to fifth grade and then from fifth grade to seventh grade. I finished high school at age 14. I did my high school plus two years of college in Sri Lanka, and then I moved to India—to Madras, which is now called Chennai. I went to an institution called the Madras Christian College, where I got my bachelor of science and masters in physics at age 20.

**Q:** How did your professional career begin?

**A:** I went to work for the atomic energy program in Bombay in 1958. India was just beginning to launch its nuclear energy program, and we were early entrants into that program. I was there until 1964, and then I came to the U.S. to do my Ph.D. at Florida State University. There were really only a few places you could do research in nuclear physics at that time, and I wanted to go some-

where I knew the people and they knew me because of the work I was doing in India. I met my wife at Florida State; she's also from India and came there the year after I did to do her MBA. We had a campus wedding—we were married by the chaplain of the university.

I was going to return to India after getting my Ph.D., but that changed because of one incident. The chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission of India met with an airplane accident in Switzerland and died there. That was an indication to me that there was no reason for me to go back because the program wouldn't be the same without him.

*continued on page 30*



**AT ORIGIN:** An unofficial advisor to the Coffee Board of India, Dr. John (right) here poses with Vijayan Rajes, vice chairman of the board, and Dr. Govindarajan, director of the country's Central Coffee Research Institute.

**Q:** What did you do when you finished your doctorate?  
**A:** I got my Ph.D. in June 1968, then I moved to San Diego and worked for a nuclear company. Most of the work I was doing there was for the U.S. government, both for the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Defense. We were in a national turmoil—1968 was not the most peaceful time in the U.S. The Vietnam War was at its peak, and the opposition to the war was everywhere.

We were in San Diego from 1968 to 1983, and during that time I transitioned to business. I was originally working for a company called Gulf General Atomic that was part of Gulf Oil. Gulf sold us in 1972, but the company they sold us to turned out to be technically bankrupt. That company folded, and I took on the job of rebuilding our department at Gulf. When I left, the company was on the American Stock Exchange and the stock was worth about \$15 million. That was my business education—hands-on, and essentially building the company back up while I was still

working as a scientist. After that I became a turnaround specialist, and that's what brought me to the Bay Area. I did that until about 1991; that's when I started working on Josuma, which was established in 1992.

**Q:** How did your coffee career come about?  
**A:** I was asked to do a study of the specialty coffee industry by some financial interests. When I looked at the specialty coffee industry and talked to people, it became obvious to me that what was special about the specialty coffee industry was a good cup of coffee. The coffee industry in the United States never taught the public how to make a good cup of coffee, or what made a good cup of coffee ... unlike in Europe, where

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many people in many countries drank a good cup of coffee as a rule. Up to that point, I was a frustrated coffee drinker. An important discovery for me was learning that coffee chemistry is very peculiar. The sweet parts of coffee come out very

*continued on page 32*

easily, and the bitter parts—the caffeine and the acids—don’t. That means that if you don’t use enough ground coffee for a given amount of water, you will not make good, balanced coffee. The American industry and therefore the American public never used enough ground coffee in preparing their cup. And the secret was that simple. That was the main conclusion of the study.



**RESEARCHING:** Dr. John examines a nutmeg tree intertwined with a coffee plant. A harsh stickler for quality, John ensures the farms he buys from maintain high standards.

**Q:** Did you get interested in coffee from that and then start pursuing it?  
**A:** No; there was an unrelated set of incidents that happened. One of our friends from India owned a coffee plantation, and his son was in San Diego around the same time we were. When he was getting ready to go back, he came to say goodbye. And I asked him, “Have you done everything you can do in the U.S.?” He said, “Yes, I’m going to go back and help my father run the coffee estate.” And I said, “Have you ever thought of being part of international business as opposed to being a coffee farmer?” One thing led to another, and he called me back a few days later and said, “I’ve decided to stay over and finish an advanced degree in international business.” He went to the Thunderbird School of International Business, and when he finished there he went back and not only helped his father run the estate but also got involved in trading coffee.

Some years later, my wife went to India and spent a few days at the estate. She asked the father, “If you think that your coffee is so good, why don’t you sell it in the U.S.?” After she came back, the son wrote to her saying, “We have actually been trying to sell coffee in the U.S., and we have not been successful. Is there anything you can do to help us?” And the rest is history. It was not by design. It was really just sheer accident. I had never had any intention of being in the coffee business. April 1992 was our first official appearance in the coffee industry; we had half a table at the SCAA show in Seattle.

**Q:** How were the first few years in business?

**A:** It was tough in many ways. Most people had come into the coffee industry very recently, as specialty coffee was sort of taking off, and many of them had no exposure to Indian coffee. So it was really missionary work, trying to tell people what India is about. India was at that time the fifth-largest producer of coffee in the world, but nobody in the U.S. had heard about it as a coffee producer. They’d heard about India as a tea producer, but Indian coffee had made no mark. We spent a lot of time going to people and educating them, especially with respect to robusta. The SCAA had already done a lot of damage to robusta when they drew a line in the sand saying the difference between specialty coffee and commercial coffee is that commercial coffee uses robusta and specialty coffee does not. That might apply to brewed coffee, but espresso is not the same. And there’s a difference between good and bad robusta; it’s similar to how we distinguish between low-quality Arabica and high-quality Arabica.

**Q:** How do you decide which coffees to import?

**A:** We do not claim to be the cheapest supplier, but we provide the very best of Indian coffees. We have learned that you cannot get quality unless you get every element in the chain to exercise quality as their prime motivation. The way we operate is that the primary responsibility for quality rests with the estate. It takes an estate several years before they can work with us. We get a certain amount of coffees from certain estates, and we never get a lot, for a number of reasons. One is that we don’t want them to depend on us, so typically we will not take more than one container of coffee from any given estate. Secondly, we ask them to be very honest with us in respect to quality, and if they don’t think the quality’s good, they shouldn’t offer it to us. Given a choice between bad coffee and no coffee, I’d prefer no coffee.

*continued on page 34*



**ESPRESSO AND COFFEE:** Josuma Coffee is known as both a roaster and an importer of Indian coffee. Dr. John attends to both sides of the business, pulling shots at Coffee Fest (left) and visiting farms like Kalledeyarapura Estate.

**Q:** Why did you start roasting?

**A:** We started roasting because so few roasters carried Indian coffees, so we wanted to offer the roasted product. And over the last 20 years, we have grown fairly consistently—our revenues have grown a shade under 20 percent each year. The only year in which we did not grow was 2010 because of the recession.

**Q:** How did you develop Malabar Gold, your signature espresso blend?

**A:** When you look at blending, you start thinking about the characteristics of espresso and of the various components that make up a blend. It occurred to me that I already had the various coffees that are ideal for making an espresso. That was a revelation to me because the conventional wisdom was that you needed coffees from different origins to make a good espresso blend. But it is simply that you need coffees of different types to represent different characteristics. It turned out that there were three countries in the whole world that produce the different type of coffees required to make a good espresso blend, and India happened to be one of them. (Brazil and Indonesia are the others.) So I was able to create an espresso blend using only coffees from India.

**Q:** How do you run the roasting company with just you and your wife on staff?

**A:** We use a completely different model; we sub-contract almost everything. We have green coffee warehoused in various places. If we had our own warehouse, its capacity would have to be twice as large as our average need. And because the Southern Hemisphere produces coffee at a different time from India, we are burning our inventory at the warehouse as others are building theirs.

The same idea applies to roasting. We have it organized very efficiently so that we only roast once a week. And even though I don't physically do the roasting, we take over the roasting plant when we roast. The roasters have been trained by us to roast the way we want, not the way they roast normally. So it's really custom-roasted.

**Q:** Do you ever miss working in physics?

**A:** Not particularly. Because frankly, coffee is the most fun I've ever had in my entire working life. First, we own the company, so we're not working for somebody else. Second, we are at a stage in life where we're not dependent on the coffee business to put food on the table, so we can pick and choose whom we do business with. There are a number of things beyond coffee itself that make it the most fun thing in my life. The coffee industry is still growing, and therefore, people are more willing to share than they would be if one's growth were dependent on another one's shrinking. Everybody can grow if they want to at this point, and that's a nice place to be. ☉