



# Sean Scott: Part of a Culture of Coffee Connoisseurs in America

Sean Scott likes good coffee. He is part of that culture that doesn't mind paying \$10 lattes both for a purist's pleasure and for a good cause. Now, if you love a good cup of coffee—or a great adventure story—you'll love this up-close look behind one of the most popular coffee shops on Clematis Street with some of today's best beans.

**By Maritza Cosano**

*Culture, Travel and Lifestyle*

**Photos: Addiel Perera, WPB Magazine**

America has a peculiar obsession with good coffee. And Sean Scott, owner of Subculture, one of the most popular coffee shops on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach, will admit his shop does not have a sexy title. After all, what they do is simple stuff. At the core, Subculture is a soulful space that was created for the community five years ago.

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Scott moved to South Florida when he was 20 years old. He went to Palm Beach Atlantic University [PBA], where he admits, "I did not major in business or in the culinary arts, but in psychology." Well, that makes sense, as he deals with people day in and day out.

When he graduated from PBA in 2001, he noticed there were no cool coffee houses in the area. Barnes & Noble's coffee shop became his hangout, which at the time, was all there was.

And that got him thinking, *I will start one.*

## **What inspired Subculture?**

After I graduated from college, I played music and decided to travel the country. I often stopped at coffee shops. Some had great atmospheres with bad coffee, or great coffee and a mediocre atmosphere. I always wanted to start one, so ten years ago I started one outside of Washington D.C. with my brother. Then, came Subculture.

## **Tell me about the coffee.**

I think something new about our culture is that we have become more aware of where coffee comes from. For me, that moment when I realized that coffee can be different happened in 2006, when I read a book called *God in a Cup*. The story is about a journalist named Michael Weissman, an adventurer and coffee connoisseur, who trekked the country with the

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nation’s most heralded coffee business hotshots—Counter Culture’s Peter Giuliano, Intelligentsia’s Geoff Watts, and Stump-town’s Duane Sorenson. She followed them and got an insight in how coffee is such a massive commodity. As most people know, it’s second to oil as a trade commodity. But the people that produce it are so massively underpaid and abused. And so, *God in the Cup* expressed how we needed to reinvent how we do business in the coffee industry. For me, that really catalyzed how I wanted to build my business. I wanted for our coffee not only to be delicious but form great relationships with farmers that offered a fair exchange. And so, that’s what we’ve done since day one.

**Where are the farmers that you do business with?**

Mainly in Ethiopia and Colombia. I think we conduct our business really well and fair trade affords us to have equitable coffee and a good base line for farmers. And when you think about it, that’s a great starting point, but there’s no incentive for the farmer. It’s just a safety net in case the commodity price drops. So, it guarantees they get paid, let’s say \$1.80 a pound. The cheapest coffee is a \$1.20 a pound.

**And how does that relationship work?**

Everything in this industry is solely based on trust. If you want to have year-long contracts with farms, you’re trusting them that their entire harvest

In the early 1990s, Central Perk coffeehouse was a major setting in the TV show “Friends.” It triggered the explosion in coffeehouse culture that’s become a major role of American city life.

is what you initially tested. From the time you place your order, it doesn’t really ship for at least two months. There’s no fast way to get it, so a lot of things can happen between harvest, roast, and extraction. Everything in our world [coffee shop] is speedy, except for coffee. And that’s not a bad thing.

**How many different coffee blends do you have?**

We have three different coffees year-round. The Colombia, Ethiopia, and the third usually rotates. It can be from Guatemala or Honduras, or other Central American coffees. They’re all organic with no chemicals, even our decaffeinated coffees.

**Originally, your coffee shop only had the barista, where people could purchase coffee, cold drinks, and pastries. What made you expand your shop?**

Very quickly, the 1,100 square foot property became full. Having full seats is great but when you constantly have over 80% capacity, statistically speaking, whether it is a church or a business, if you’re at capacity people will stop coming because they’ll assume, you’re full. I knew that space next door was becoming available. I didn’t really have an idea what it could be used for, but that we should take it because we were only a year-and-a-half in, and we were already at capacity. Moving an operation is wickedly expensive, so that was not an option. And, we wanted to stay on the main thoroughfare [Clematis Street].







**Restaurateur, Rodney Mayo, owns many restaurants here in West Palm Beach, most especially on Clematis Street, with Voltaire, Hullabaloo, Camelot, Howley's, and others in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. How do the two of you work together?**

He's awesome! He's started in the industry over 35 years ago right here on Clematis Street. It's been so great working with him, helping me with that side of the business. As soon as we opened that extra space called the Annex, [two-and-a-half years ago] aside from the food service that he provided, it became a viable space for events such as a book club and coffee roasting training sessions, and just a meeting space for groups and such.

**So, it's almost like you have two different venues. The coffee shop bar and the Annex.**

Exactly, and you don't have to shut down the whole shop if someone wants to bring their book club or a party with thirty people in, so you put them in the Annex, allowing to keep the coffee bar running. Unlike a lot of places, we also have the outside alley space, which people love.

**And so, you've built a great community spot that people love so much...**

Yeah, my hope is that, and this is part of what I've heard from people, there's a connection that has come from here. Whether it is an artistic hub or a place to build friendships, it is creating a launching pad and connection point for anyone and everyone. There are so many different types of people who come here. From writers and artists to students, educators, lawyers, and other businesspeople... Part of me protects the authenticity or character of what Subculture is too. I don't want someone to come here and think, *Oh, geez, someone is going to try to network with me.* So, there's a balance of naturally fostering community and allowing community involvement. My hope is that I've helped catalyzed all those things.



*The Bill Bone Cycling team, a cycling racing club based in downtown West Palm Beach, just down the road from Subculture, take a break in the alley after a brisk morning ride. (Photo by Maritza Cosano)*

**What do you like to do for fun?**

I love doing my podcast called the Coffee Life. That's a lot of fun! It's telling the stories of people who come through the coffee shop.

**Tell me about that.**

There are so many amazing people who come through here that I wanted to tell their stories. I wanted people to know how many amazing people are seating just a few feet from them. And you see them, but there's no real reason to really start a conversation with them. So the podcast opens up another avenue of connection.

**When did you start Coffee Life?**

About a year-and-a-half ago. I've already released my 36th episode. It's a fun dialogue. I love writing. Like essays and such. I'm 40 now, and the older I get, I realize there are a lot of people who write methodically now, whether it is via social

media or blogs, but not a lot of people bridge the caste and address issues in life in ways that aren't arty. And you know, as a writer, it's hard to find your unique voice and write in a way that reaches everyone. It's not really popular now to write in a way that is centrist, and it doesn't matter if you are talking about religion or politics, or whatever... as enlightened as we think we are as a culture, I feel the same exact opposite thing is happening. When I write, I try to bring it back to the center.

**Do you blog?**

No. Social media is a beast in itself. To try to manage it for a company and then personally... and if you have a family... it can consume you. Just like the podcast, I write and release some in Facebook whenever I can, but I don't have a website for it. My wife catalogs it all for me. Maybe it will be a book one day.