

# 5. Café Liégeois



## Coffee, Hand in Hand



Café Liégeois was created in 1955 by Charles Liégeois and is now managed by his sons, Michel and Benoît Liégeois, who are proud to carry on a family shareholding independent of any food industry group. In the premises in Battice, on the roasting side, a number of jute sacks containing the precious beans bear the indication “organic”, while on the packaging side, numerous packages, all in white, bear the attractive Mano Mano logo. Representing two hands crossed around a coffee bean, the image is accompanied by the leitmotiv of this particular range of products... “Coffee for respect”: more than an advertising slogan, these words are faithful to the development of the company over the last 10 years. “As a coffee roaster,” explains Michel Liégeois, “it is obvious to go to the producing countries to see the raw materials and have contacts with the cooperatives that export the coffee that one uses. When you’re on site, however, you realize their living conditions and difficulties. You’re not insensitive, you keep it in mind, and one day you will want to do something.”

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Ten years ago, this desire to act took concrete form first through the creation of a range of coffee with the Max Havelaar label. At the beginning of 2008, being the first on the market to create Fair trade coffee products intended for the hotel, restaurant and catering sector, Café Liégeois decided to reposition its range. An internal team of 8 people was then tasked with verifying whether this range was still in line with the company philosophy. After having sifted through numerous other labels, Café Liégeois decided to continue to refer to Max Havelaar, the only one to be founded on 3 pillars: economic, environmental and social. “The other labels did not take the economic aspect into account, but for us it is very important,” justifies Michel Liégeois: “guaranteeing a minimum price to the producers

is fundamental.” On the basis of this reflection, Café Liégeois named its range of fair products Mano Mano, and provided it with a logo whose design made a name for itself in a few hours at the end of these months of procedures: “Mano Mano means working hand in hand with the producers, the customers, the workers in the factory. It is a symbol of exchange and of sharing. It is a collaboration between the people who make this project exist,” explains Christophe Deharre, manager for marketing and communication at Café Liégeois.

Mano Mano has become a real driver for the company and all its employees. Shortly before 2008, Michel Liégeois met Jean-François Bavay, a farmer from Jurbise who goes every year to Chiapas, one of the poorest regions of Mexico, to help the people on the spot. The founder of the non-profit organisation Terre Solidaire organized a tasting of the coffee produced with the help of its project. And very quickly it became necessary for Café Liégeois to integrate this coffee into the Mano Mano range. “This corresponded to our desire to do something,” Michel Liégeois resumes. “The Mano Mano range therefore includes certain products that are 100% Chiapas, with which we are going one step further: for each package sold, Café Liégeois undertook to cede back an additional 0.10 euro to the non-profit Terre Solidaire.” In 2009, Café Liégeois was thus able to submit a first cheque of 5000 euro to the association. While formerly they sold only 10% of their harvest, the small producers united in the Majomut can now promote nearly 90% of it, thanks to the arrangements financed by Terre Solidaire. For two years Café Liégeois has also been supporting a cooperative in Minova, in the Congo: “We bought 100 of the first 200 sacks of products, more expensive than the Max Havelaar coffee, to give them the means to grow, and above all to act in such a way that this coffee will one day be labelled Max Havelaar...”

In its determination to be consistent, the company wanted to extend its approach with a series of undertakings recorded in a charter. Undertaking to offer in its range only



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coffees labelled Max Havelaar, Café Liégeois has set itself other targets: raising the awareness of its customers and employees concerning environmental problems, establishing procedures that respect the environment, taking on a part of the surcharge connected with the Fair trade labelling, and seeing to the well-being of its employees in their professional environment. To manage these undertakings, an eco-team, in which all the departments of the company are represented, meets more or less four times a year. "Each time that a new project is created, it is submitted for discussion by this group, coordinated by the quality manager. It's a magnificent link that makes it possible to circulate ideas from the base to the team and back again."

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The company had a first carbon assessment drawn up on its 2008 financial year. The analysis takes into account the impact of purchases of coffee from the producers, as well as the consumption by the customers. "Thanks to this analysis we realized that the part that weighs the most in this carbon assessment is the operation of coffee machines and automatic distributors. In the hotel, restaurant and catering industry these are large energy-consuming machines that operate 24h/24. We are studying solutions for this: we would like to adapt our machines with timers..." While waiting for the next carbon assessment planned for the 2010 financial year, the company, which is already using green energy, envisages the installation of photovoltaic panels and of co-generation ovens. "The packaging is also a major dossier in the study. We would like our packages to be bio-compostable... We are close to this. We work on it." The company's ethical approach is taking other concrete turns: the organic part in all the brand's coffees has quadrupled in 3 years, and in certain packets that are not stamped organic up to ¾ of the product is organic! "The idea is to act in such a way that little by little,





all the Café Liégeois products become sustainable. We can go further, and finance compensation: all this is currently under discussion,” Michel Liégeois dreams out loud.

The enthusiasm of the head of the company creates emulators. “When we launched it, I didn’t think that we would have such an important relay station in the media and with the consumers. It gives us wings! The figures say it all. We are making major progress, we are sensing a great potential. There are requests from abroad. Our rivals are talking about our project.” But it is on the internal operations front of the company that Michel Liégeois has discovered the greatest benefits of the approach: the project, a unifying force, has had such a good reception that the eco-team has had to turn down applicants. The staff, kept informed about the different projects via notice boards and conferences, is...sustainably thrilled!

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Isabelle Mason for REcentre

Interviewee / Michel Liégeois, Managing director, and Christophe Deharre, Marketing and communication manager

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Sector • Coffee roasting

Year of foundation • 1955

Number of employees • 94

Turnover (2009) •  
25 million EUR