

10 Minutes With—2020 U.S. CoffeeChamps Edition: Michelle Johnson



We chat with Michelle about her return to competition, inspirational coffee women, and the thriving Black coffee community.

BY KATRINA YENTCH
BARISTA MAGAZINE ONLINE

Cover photo by Jeff Newton of Americano Mondays

*Editor's note: Last week, we began a **U.S. CoffeeChamps** edition of our 10 Minutes With series, featuring competitors headed to nationals in February. We continue it this week with Michelle Johnson, a competitor and active voice for social justice in the coffee community.*

Coffee community advocate Michelle Johnson is making 2020 her year. She recently confirmed a spot at nationals during the Barista competition qualifier in Nashville, Tenn.—after not competing for nearly three years. During these three years, she's made **The Chocolate Barista** blog a lifestyle platform for Black people and other racial minorities in the coffee industry to speak openly about their experiences. Michelle has also contributed to similar efforts like **Black Coffee**, along with leading a discussion at the **Re:co Symposium** on diversity in the specialty-coffee industry. She spent a year in Melbourne directing marketing initiatives for **Barista Hustle**, and is always volunteering to speak or emcee at one event or another. It'd be practically false to say that 2020 is Michelle Johnson's year considering the landmarks she has made since 2016. As the new education manager at **Red Bay Coffee**, she'll be responsible for the training programs and expansion of the Oakland, Calif.-based roaster into the Los Angeles area, but we have a feeling she'll be diving into plenty of other exciting projects in the new decade.



After three years away from competing, Michelle is heading to nationals in 2020. Photo by Justin Sisson.

Katrina Yentch: Congratulations on your success in Nashville! What motivated you to return to the competition stage?

Michelle Johnson: Thank you so much! I feel like the universe was conspiring [with] a few things that all happened simultaneously to push me back into competition. For one, I believe all of my previous times competing were missing one or more crucial elements to help someone do well—positive affirmation and support from my company/team, financial support, dedicated practice time, a feedback loop, etc. The last time I competed in Austin ended poorly in a DQ [disqualification] and was also the loneliest competition season I'd had, so I wanted to give myself another chance. I felt like that couldn't be it for me.

So as this current competition season was approaching, the opportunity to work with Red Bay came up and they were fully on board. Additionally, I had already started to develop a relationship with Jeanine at **JNP Coffee**, the importer of the coffee I used, at my previous job. So with all this support *and* the fact that I'd be representing two Black-owned coffee companies and a coffee from Burundi, it felt like the best time to make a comeback!

What are some things in coffee that you're really excited about right now?

There's a thriving coffee culture within the American Black community that's been bubbling up for awhile and coming to a boil. There are new coffee shops, roasting companies (big and small), an exciting generation of Black coffee professionals changing the game, and enthused consumers who are all making noise around the country. **BLK & Bold**, **Boon Boona Coffee**, Red Bay (obviously!), **Portrait Coffee**, **Everybody's Busy**, **Drip Coffee**, and **Southeastern Roastery** are just a few of so many doing their thing. **Getchusomegear** is probably one of my favorite coffee-focused ventures at the moment—Chris gathers donated coffee gear and sends them out to marginalized people around the country for free. Seeing the amount of Black competitors who participated and qualified for the U.S. Coffee Championships is so inspiring to see, and I'm sure we'll see more as the years go by. I try to keep my eye out on everything going on but the growth is happening so fast, it's hard to keep up! It's lit.

Who is someone in coffee who really inspires you and why?

There are actually three women who all really inspire me and they're in the importing and business game. Phyllis Johnson owns **BD Imports** and has been working in coffee for decades, often being the only Black woman AND woman of color on executive boards a majority of her career. **Vava Angwenyi** is a Kenyan businesswoman and importer who's dedicated to empowering Kenyan coffee farmers with trading knowledge and inspiring more women to enter the coffee industry. I've seen both Phyllis and Vava speak at past Re:co Symposiums, and the work they're doing for Black American coffee consumers and Kenyan coffee farmers, respectively, is so impactful.

Lastly, Jeanine Niyonzima-Aroian, who owns JNP Coffee, a Burundian coffee exporter and importer, is my most recent inspiration. I used one of her coffees, a

natural from the Kayanza region of Burundi, at competition. The common thread with all of these women is that they've returned to their roots in coffee, sharing knowledge and having a stake in an industry built on exploiting communities like ours. I sincerely hope to be like them one day!



The crew behind Black Coffee. Photo by Shaunté Glover.

What are the top three artists on your café mixtape?

Noname for the chill morning vibes, Doja Cat during an afternoon rush, R&B Drake when the evening Tinder dates start rolling in hahaha.

What's an interest you have outside of coffee?

I'm really into astrology, reading natal birth charts and transits, and any star-based energy work. Not only is it fun to study but I found it helps me to better understand how I like to live and work, aka setting BOUNDARIES! It's also fun to learn about other people in this way and how I can be a better friend, colleague, leader, and so on. For those wondering, I'm a Sagittarius sun, Gemini moon, and Taurus rising!