

PORTLAND, ORE.

story and photos  
by  
Chris Ryan

# SPOTLIGHT

## ★ Oblique Coffee ★ ★ Roasters ★

Tradition emanates from every ounce of John Chandler's

being. The 40-year-old co-proprietor (with his wife Heather) of Portland, Ore.'s Oblique Coffee Roasters has roots in pioneer country: His mother was born in the Eastern Oregon town of Weston at the foot of the Blue Mountains, an obstacle crossed by Western settlers. He carries with him a tireless work ethic cultivated from his post-college jobs on commercial fishing boats in Alaska, Oregon and Washington. And he has in his possession an extensive collection of rare old artifacts, from dolls to weapons to much in between.

But his traditionalism reveals itself most clearly in the setting for his coffee shop: a Victorian home built in 1891 that also serves as the Chandlers' place of residence. The building is the heart of Oblique Coffee Roasters; the Chandlers purchased it in 2007 and took on a massive renovation project that included turning the large downstairs room (which was a grocery store in the early-20th century) into a retail-roasting facility. Oblique opened its doors in March 2010, and it's now one of a stable of shops vying for business in Portland's ultra-competitive specialty coffee market.

### BEFORE BUSINESS

Entering Oblique on a drizzly Monday morning, the stylized interior is occupied by small groups of college co-eds chatting quietly

and laptop toters working silently. Chandler leads me behind the bar and up the stairs to his spacious living room, where modern amenities like a flat-screen TV blend with Art Nouveau-style design touches. Recent foot surgery has forced the energetic proprietor to take it easy, so

he eases back on a green futon and begins to tell Oblique's story. His roots may be pioneer, but his vibe

is modern Northwesterner: He sports a few days of beard growth and wears a green-and-black flannel shirt, Portland Trailblazer wristband, casual brown pants, moccasins and a well-traveled black baseball cap.

Chandler has abundant pride when it comes to Oblique's transformation, but he says he wouldn't have been able to take on such a back-breaking project if he hadn't endured long, brutal weeks on the salmon boats. "That really taught me my work ethic," he says. "The lessons that dad tries to teach you, I really learned them once I got on the boats. We're a very hard-working family." Chandler earned enough money on the water to make a down payment on his first house,

and he went on to enjoy success in what was then a booming real-estate market in the Northwest.

When it was time to buy his next property, Chandler returned to a dream he'd had growing up. "I'm an English lit major, and I've always had the fantasy of having a bookstore or coffee shop, ideally in a place where you can live in the same building," he says. Chandler saw an online listing for the property that would become Oblique and was immediately captivated by its old-fashioned



**HOME SWEET HOME:** John and Heather Chandler live in the upper level of their retail-roasting spot, Oblique Coffee Roasters.



**OLD-FASHIONED:** Built in 1891, the building that houses Oblique Coffee Roasters underwent a three-year overhaul before opening business.

charm: “We came here and saw it, and it was like stepping back in time.” Chandler says he was able to procure the property for an appealing price because of some structural flaws. “The city was threatening to tear it down because it was leaning 20 inches to the southeast at the southeast corner of the building,” he says. “It was really torqued. And there was a 70-foot elm tree growing into the basement on the southwest corner.” Fittingly, the building’s misshapenness served as the inspiration for the shop’s name: “The definition of ‘oblique’ is ‘no corresponding perpendicular or parallel lines,’” Chandler says. “This building is crooked as hell.”

Once the house was in the Chandlers’ possession, the work began. First, they had to dispose of the loads of garbage housed by the building’s previous owner, who Chandler describes as a “packrat hoarder.” But the owner was also a collector of antiques and artifacts, and the Chandlers found gems within the rubble: two original Kewpie dolls, a mid-1800s State of Oregon tourism spoon, the original ticket book from the grocery store that formerly occupied the downstairs space, and even a Nazi Germany-era dagger. “We sorted through everything for I think two months,” Chandler says. “There was a lot of cool stuff.” With the place cleaned up, it was time to address the structural flaws. Chandler and a team of contractors lifted the building, dug out the old foundation and expanded the basement to a commercially approved space with nine-foot ceilings.

## COORDINATING COFFEE

Chandler says he didn’t start drinking coffee until college, and even then it was only to stay awake while studying. His “aha moment” with coffee came in the late-’90s, when he was working at his father’s electrical business in Southeast Portland and a coffee roastery opened across the street. The business was Stumptown Coffee, and the roaster’s Hair Bender espresso blend changed Chandler’s perspective. “It was incredible nutty and chocolatey with that real bright lemon,” he says. “That seriously got me crazy about coffee.”

Once Oblique’s build-out was complete, the Chandlers turned their focus to the coffee-roasting side of their business. Chandler credits serendipitous timing for helping them acquire a roaster; the day Oblique was approved for a home equity line of credit, Chandler found a Craigslist posting for a 1986 Probat L5 roaster available in the outskirts of Portland—not only local, but at \$6,000, a third of the price he had seen it elsewhere. “I believe in God because of those little instances,” he says. “It barely needed anything. We just painted it, did a little bit of gas line work and put some electronic controls on it. That’s it.” (They also bestowed the roaster with a name: Bart.) Chandler, who roasts all of Oblique’s coffee, taught himself the craft by reading books and experimenting, but he says there’s no magic in the roasting

*continued on page 90*



process for him. "I think I'm the one roaster in Portland who's going to tell you that it's not that big of a deal," he says. "You get really good-quality coffee, you get a good piece of equipment, you pay attention to it and it's going to turn out."

Oblique is still a small operation; the Chandlers work seven days a week and are the shop's only employees (though they have two friends who occasionally fill in on bar shifts). Chandler says the nonstop work can be a challenge, but it's necessary right now as they grow. "Fishermen call it 'grinding it out,'" he says. "It just takes time." Chandler's traditionalism comes out in the method he's using to grow Oblique: He tries to engage every customer, stressing conversation over laptop culture. "We want to try to get to know our neighbors because this is our neighborhood," he says. "And we want to try to impart that and inculcate the culture that we feel has been lost. People are very insulated today with laptops and iPods and smartphones. People don't make



**A LOOK INSIDE:** Oblique owner John Chandler's carpentry shows up in the shop's decor, from the hand-carved sign that will adorn the shop's exterior to the wooden table (right) in the retail space.

eye contact and people don't say hi. So we try to start small talk." Chandler thinks strong relationships with customers will be key to Oblique's success, as the shop's location is in a residential area rather than amid other businesses. "This is a destination café," he says. "We don't have any other commercial centers around us, but we do get bike traffic and walking traffic because there's a park close-by. I think it's a solid B-plus location."

## FACING FORWARD

Oblique has seen signs of growth; March 2011 was the first month Chandler was able to run tracking figures, and he says business was up 10 percent from March 2010. "I think that's a good indicator for us, not knowing what we were doing whatsoever," he says. "And in today's market, I think it's really good."

Oblique received a boost in February when the shop was featured in the Independent Film Channel series "Portlandia," during a scene in which Portland's fictional mayor (played by Kyle MacLachlan) put stars Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein in charge of assembling a baseball team for the city. "We've actually had people in here from out of town with cameras," Chandler says. "Being on 'Portlandia' is really helping." The show was recently renewed for a second season, and Chandler says he's had initial talks with the producers about filming at Oblique again.

Assuming that Oblique's stable footing leads to long-term success, Chandler has big plans for the future. The 1,200-square-foot, commercially zoned basement space that he and his team renovated will effectively double Oblique's retail space if and when they expand to include it. In the longer term, Chandler is considering purchasing some land in Costa Rica that could possibly include a coffee farm.

But in the meantime, the Chandlers will continue to slowly grow the business—like the building that houses them, they're in it for the long haul. "We're not leaving this place, whatsoever," Chandler says. "It's not just a coffee business—this is our life." ☪

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