

# THE RIDE OF HIS LIFE

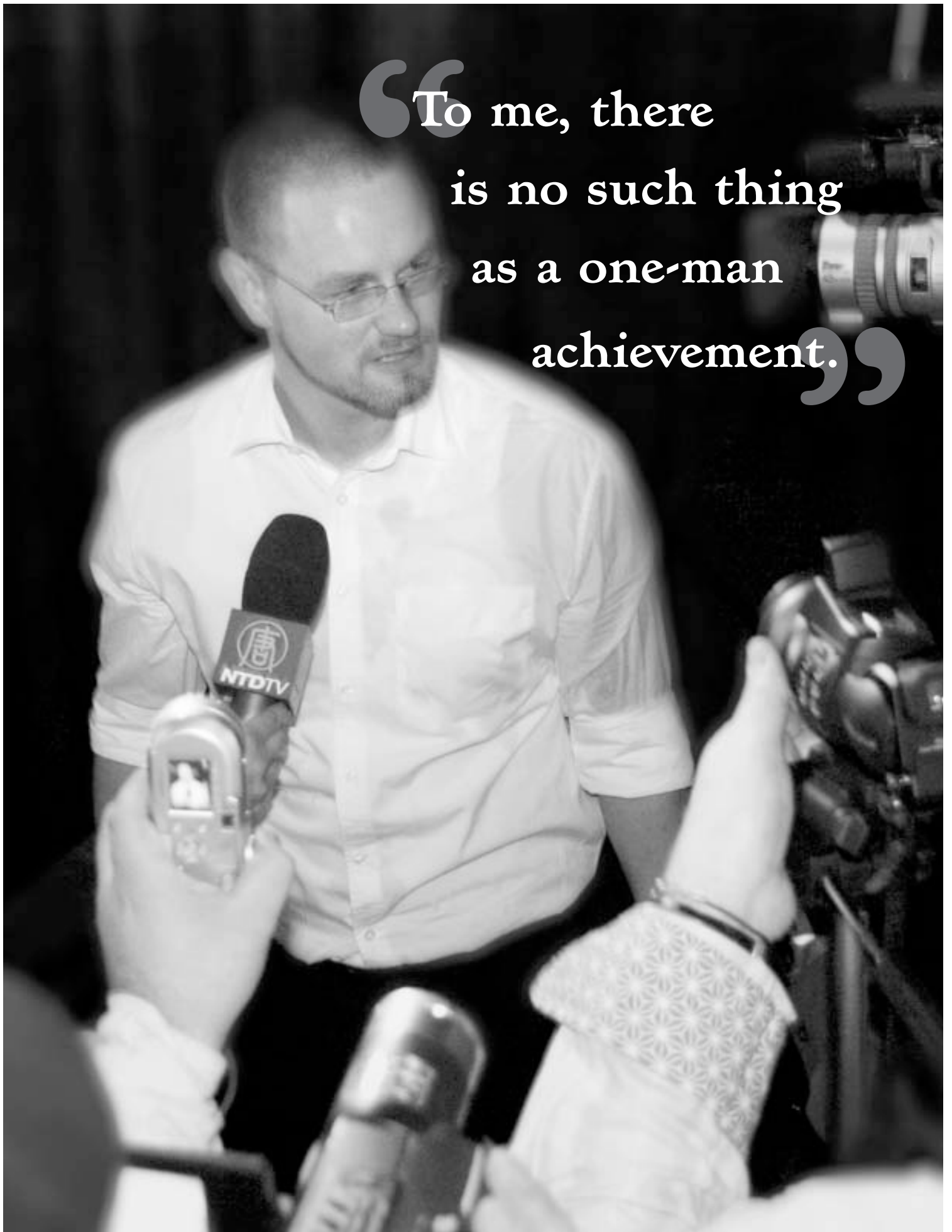
TROELS OVERDAL POULSEN  
TAKES THE  
WORLD

Story by Kenneth R. Olson • Photos by Sheldon Ferguson

In Denmark, paying attention to details often overlooked by others and doing things a little differently than everybody else is a sort of a defining national characteristic. Consider, for example, the recent history of the country's capital city, Copenhagen. Since the Middle Ages, Danes have been coming to the public square in the heart of the capital known as the Amagertov. The square began its public life as a fish and vegetable market, for catches and crops brought across the Inderhavnen, where the famous statue of the Little Mermaid now stands, from the island of Amager. The vibrant marketplace, however, was shut down in the 19th century, and in the ensuing years, the downtown core of the city began to be overrun with vehicles, cars, roads, and parking lots.

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# STAR

Beginning in 1962, however, the city's inhabitants began an innovative program to reclaim their community. Reconsidering the direction development had taken them, where new projects were undertaken to improve the community for their cars instead of the Danish denizens, they decided to make a conscious effort to remake their city in favor of the people who lived there rather than the cars that were meant to serve them.

Shopping streets were closed to vehicular traffic and regulated for pedestrians only. The parking lots were shut down, the

spectacular and extraordinary. Europa's dedication to great coffee and service attracts like-minded people to it, so much so that now three world champion baristas have emerged from its coffee bar, most recently 2005 World Barista Champion, Troels Overdal Poulsen.

## HISTORY OF CHAMPIONS

Poulsen stands well over six feet tall and is solidly built. With his nearly shaved head and wire-rimmed glasses, it's forgivable to



pavement torn up and the squares resurfaced. For 35 years, the project continued, slowly taking more and more of the city away from the wheels of autos and giving it back to the feet of pedestrians.

One of the highlights of the project was the rehabilitation of the Strøget, a shopping road that runs through the very middle of the city, which became the longest outdoor pedestrian mall in the world. Today it meets another long pedestrian-only street, the Købemagsgade, at the Amagertov. Thus, the medieval fish market has once again become a vibrant, bustling public square, where every day it teems with students, businesspeople, shoppers, tourists, and other city folk on their way through Copenhagen.

And as people gather in the middle of the square, by the stork fountain, under the majestic and towering spires of Helligånds and Nikolai Churches, they can stop into a welcoming little café with quite a reputation for great service and coffee. In fact, that little café, called Europa 1989, has built a reputation much like the city it calls home, by taking what in others' eyes might appear to be the mundane and ordinary and reimagining it as something

assume he's an imposing figure. But he is quick to smile, and his handshake seems to swallow your fingers in a warm and firm embrace. His demeanor is gentle, and his conversational tone is soft and engaging, leading one to feel he has known you forever and you're a trusted confidant, even if you've just met, even if he's fresh off his win and his face is still a little flushed from capturing the world champion's crown.

Poulsen moved to Copenhagen five years ago, when he was 22, from Denmark's third-largest city, Odense, birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen, located on the Island of Fyn, approximately 80 miles west of the nation's capital. After attending college for a while and spending years working in a number of different positions, including as an assistant in a kindergarten for handicapped children, a bus-tour guide, a telemarketer, and a dishwasher, Poulsen landed a job at Europa. It seemed, at the time, to be simply a good reason to move to the bustling, big city of Copenhagen. How much that simple transition would ultimately change his life, however, Poulsen could never have guessed.

Prior to working at Europa, Poulsen had not been involved in

Denmark's coffee culture. "I didn't really have any particular interest in coffee," Poulsen says. His position at the café was just another in a long line of day jobs where he could make some money before moving on to something else. But then everything changed.

Martin Hildebrandt of Europa traveled to Monte Carlo to participate in the first World Barista Championship (WBC) and finished in third place. After that, says Poulsen, he was inspired by Hildebrandt's success. So were others, including Poulsen's coworker, Fritz Storm, and the café's owner, Jens Nørgaard. "My interest naturally grew, and I found that I really enjoyed pouring rosettas. So, as with many other baristas, I was inspired by the people around me, and that successful experience of pouring that first latte art, well, it sort of set me off!"

Hildebrandt won the Danish title again the following year and once more returned to the WBC, held that year in Miami, Florida. This time, Hildebrandt claimed the crown for Denmark. And then, in 2002, in a feat that has yet to be repeated, at the WBC in Oslo, Norway, a Dane won the world title for the second consecutive year. But not only did that year's champion come from the same country as the previous year's, he came from the very same café. On the way to his WBC championship, Fritz Storm won the Danish nationals by placing ahead of his coworker, Poulsen.

Determined to live up to the high-standards he had set for himself and which he had learned from Europa, Poulsen decided to compete in the national championship once again the following year. With another year of experience under his belt as a barista, and depending on the support and unprecedented knowledge base

found among the people of Europa, Poulsen won the Danish crown. Before he knew it, he was on his way to Boston, Mass., and the fourth WBC competition to try for the title and the chance to prove himself to be yet another of the championship-quality baristas from Europa.

"Coping with expectations is something everybody has to do," he says, "and quite frankly, I think the expectations of the people around you that you care about, and those of yourself, weigh heavier than that based on a track record."

"In Boston," Poulsen says, "I felt that even though Denmark had won twice in a row, simply getting a place in finals would be a success. I mean, you're competing against the best baristas in the world, and with that fact in mind, I was quite proud of having presented my program without any disasters and with a powerful signature drink featuring dry ice that made the crowd go berserk." Poulsen finished fourth in the competition, and his team as a whole felt they had achieved something really terrific.

The following year, Poulsen recused himself from competing and instead went to the WBC in Trieste, Italy to assist the judges. This competition was even bigger than the one before, and Poulsen remembers the tense moments leading up to the announcement of Norwegian Tim Wendelboe as the 2004 World Barista Champion.

Interestingly, Wendelboe and Poulsen chose similar paths to their end goal of winning the world title. Both took a year off from competing to learn from the judging experience. Wendelboe, having placed second in the world in both 2001 and 2002, learned by judging at the event in Boston where Poulsen found himself in

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the finals. The next year—the year Poulsen worked with the judges—Wendelboe finally took top honors. Poulsen followed suit in 2005.

“I think Troels stands out with his super polished and professional presentations,” Wendelboe says. “He is an excellent barista that is able to focus on the details in espresso preparation, even in the WBC finals.”

## WORTH ITS WEIGHT

One of the details that Poulsen and his companions at Europa and the Copenhagen Coffee Academy (CCA) have spent a long time studying is milk. Again taking the mundane and making it profound, Poulsen and his brethren have sought to understand milk on a biochemical level, and they brought the tools of science to task on that white liquid and essential ingredient for many espresso drinks.

In his preparation for the 2005 WBC, Poulsen had access to Morten Münchow, who works for the CCA and is an expert in the molecular gastronomy at play in espresso and milk. Though Poulsen’s choice for milk in competition—a fairly regular whole milk from Denmark—may seem uninspired, it was, in fact, anything but, as Münchow explains, “Milk is a very fragile biochemical material, and the ‘milk taste’ only happens within quite narrow limits and depends on the condition of the milk. Since it is also a complex liquid, a lot of things can go wrong and



thereby exceed these narrow limits and result in an off-flavor.” Because of this complexity, Münchow says, it’s vitally important to have thorough experience with any milk before using it in competition. “Again,” says Münchow, “as milk is a fragile material, the taste and foaming properties change significantly as a function of the treatment from cow to pitcher. Pasteurization, homogenization and microfiltration all effect the milk.”

So for Poulsen, traveling to Seattle, Wash., to compete in the WBC, picking up a stateside milk to use was not an option. Instead, once again finding the significance and importance of details, his team packed their “ordinary” Danish milk in coolers and trucked it through customs and across the ocean, finally storing it in the hotel minibar for the duration of competition.

The comfort that comes with having a deep understanding of a subject is evident to baristas who have worked with Poulsen, and they see it every time he approaches the steam wand. “To me, Troels is amazing with the milk,” says Klaus Thomsen, a barista at Estate Coffee in Copenhagen and a member of the Danish barista team that won the 2004 Nordic Barista Cup (NBC) under Poulsen’s guidance as team coach. “He has done latte art flawlessly for a long time, and his rosettas are some of the most perfectly even I’ve ever seen.” But Poulsen has found that it takes more than just a wicked rosetta to win a world championship. It takes a whole team.

“In preparing for Seattle,” Poulsen says, “there were many people involved, but the core team consisted of five people: Jens Nørgaard, Martin Hildebrandt, Morten Münchow, Troels Trier Vogel (chef at Europa) and me.” Poulsen’s list of teammates, however, doesn’t end there or anywhere near there. He continues, “Other people also played important roles: my girlfriend, Grit, a stonecarver, a carpenter, a blacksmith, visual designer, a mental coach, a graphic designer, and others.” He could not have won, says Poulsen, had he been on his own, had he been without those teammates and their expertise, their enthusiasm and their support. “To me,” he says, “there is no such thing as a one-man achievement.”

## TRAINING REGIME

Poulsen trained steadily for the WBC for about four months with various levels of intensity. “I was studying Arabic at Copenhagen University at the same time,” he says, “but I chose to focus 100 percent on a career in coffee and on the upcoming competition, and so I quit my studies after having attended for two years.” His training took place at the CCA, where he says he had access to great facilities and that other important commodity in the specialty coffee industry: knowledge. Poulsen describes the CCA as “a place where basically anybody interested in coffee can receive education in a wide variety of coffee-related subjects, from running a café to training for barista competitions.”

Poulsen’s signature beverage was developed over the course of a month as he hunted for flavors to compliment the espresso he had chosen. “He called us from Europe out of the blue!” recalls specialty coffee veteran, George Howell, who roasted Poulsen’s WBC-winning espresso blend through his company, Terroir Select Coffee. “I have known the fine people from Europa for several

**“It seems to me Troels is all about mastery, subtlety and just the right touch of understated theater, allowing his beverages to have the last word.”**

**-George Howell,  
Terroir Select Coffee**

years, and they were familiar with Terroir’s pioneering efforts to spotlight quality craftsmen-farmers. That is what Troels said he wanted—a quality single-origin statement espresso. He and the entire Europa team were thrilled when they tried our latest and final version, developed months earlier. Troels then built his special drink to complement Terroir’s espresso, not the other way around.”

Poulsen explains, “Chef Troels Trier Vogel and I spent a lot of hours on the signature

beverage development, and we tried to be open-minded when others brought new ideas to the process. Basically it was inspired by the wish to thoroughly introduce the barista/sommelier concept to the restaurant.”

Poulsen’s signature drink is called ESB, “Enhanced Sensory Balance,” and it is built from three ingredients: espresso, pepper and lavender. “Pepper is a very aromatic spice, and it was present in our thoughts from day one,” Poulsen says. “We didn’t want the pungency of it, only the aromatics. A lot of things were tried, but eventually lavender was picked, mainly because of its freshness and heavy aromatic (properties) that seemed perfect for rounding off the drink, especially if served cold.”

Again, through the selection and study of the ingredients, the attention to the finest details and the excavation of the sublime from the sands of the staid shine through in Poulsen’s work. “How well-suited lavender is to Terroir’s unique light-roasted Daterra Farm espresso!” Howell exclaims. “It was really an inspired stroke! He made the espresso statement that much clearer and more pleasurable by separating the taste experiences. I think Troels really showed his culinary mastery of what blending truly means, beginning with his choice of Terroir’s espresso and triumphantly ending with the most aesthetically creative yet wonderful specialty drink creation of the event,” he says of Poulsen’s unusual decision to compartmentalize the elements of his drink for presentation to the judges. “It seems to me Troels is all about mastery, subtlety and just the right touch of understated theater, allowing his beverages to have the last word.”

## **ESPRESSO AMBASSADOR**

The judges in Seattle agreed with Howell’s assessment, and with their last word awarded Poulsen the championship, leaving the Dane with yet another challenge to tackle, how to wear the crown of world champion.

“During the next year,” he says, “I want to do my part in sharing with others what others have shared with me, and do the best I can to fill out this title, promoting specialty coffee and the people involved in it. But hey, I’ve never been in this position before so it might take some getting used to.”

Wendelboe passes along this advice to Poulsen as he hands off the title: “I think Troels will realize that the title he worked so hard for does not mean that much as a title. It is more the opportunities that come along with it. I like to see the title as a key

to all the locked doors in the coffee world. He will learn a lot more about coffee than he has ever before, too, because of all the traveling (he will do) and the new experiences he will have as the world champion. I think the main responsibility for the world champ is to spread the gospel of espresso and the WBC; to teach new baristas how to be excellent; and also to be visible in the media to promote specialty coffee and the barista craft.”

Poulsen has already uttered his first piece of advice for future competitors, and it’s just one simple word: “Share.” More formally Poulsen says, “If I should advise someone beginning as a barista and in competitions, I would say that if it’s something you enjoy, then keep at it, make yourself better by seeking information, and remember that information is always more available if you give some away at the same time.”

Poulsen has already built a reputation among his Danish countrymen and Nordic kinfolk as an excellent teacher and mentor. Thomsen remembers the easy and affable style Poulsen brought to Danish national team as the coach for the 2004 NBC held in Iceland. “He set the standard that we should have fun doing everything or else we wouldn’t win anything,” Thomsen says. “He said something like, ‘It doesn’t matter if you take home first place. If you haven’t enjoyed doing the competition, it really doesn’t matter if you win.’”

Poulsen, though, sees much more potential in the barista profession than what is found in competitions alone. He would like to see baristas become more respected in Denmark and throughout the culinary world as something akin to a wine expert or sommelier. He doesn’t think the transition should take too long especially since many places are already feeling some pressure from their customers to incorporate more sophisticated coffee programs.

“The consumers are becoming increasingly more demanding,” he says, “and in many places they expect higher and higher quality, knowing that the barista and his or her skills are part of good coffee. Personally, I would like to see the barista enter the restaurants, and there provide the same expertise as that of the sommelier, thereby enabling coffee to become a product with the same quality-span in the mind of the consumer as, for example, wine, cognac, food, and so on. You have people in restaurants paying hundreds of dollars for red wine, and the next day they buy red wine for \$15 in the mall. When it comes to coffee, however, you still see everybody paying basically the same price in the fanciest restaurant as in the crummiest coffeeshop. We can do better than that!”

Perhaps it will be Poulsen who is able to open the public’s eyes to what is already all around them, to make them look upon something as simple as a cup of coffee and find the unexpected in it. Maybe with baristas as passionate and focused as Poulsen leading the charge, they can take the same approach that led the people of Copenhagen to look to their city’s streets and instead of asking, ‘How many cars can we fit on it?’ wonder instead, ‘How can we make it better serve the people of the city?’

Tim Wendelboe says, “I think this role (of WBC Champion) is getting more important as there are more countries entering the world of espresso and specialty coffee. We need the coffee heroes to show people that we mean serious business and are here to stay.” With Poulsen as this year’s World Barista Champion, already hard at work spreading that gospel, it seems a new coffee hero has taken the stage.

**b**