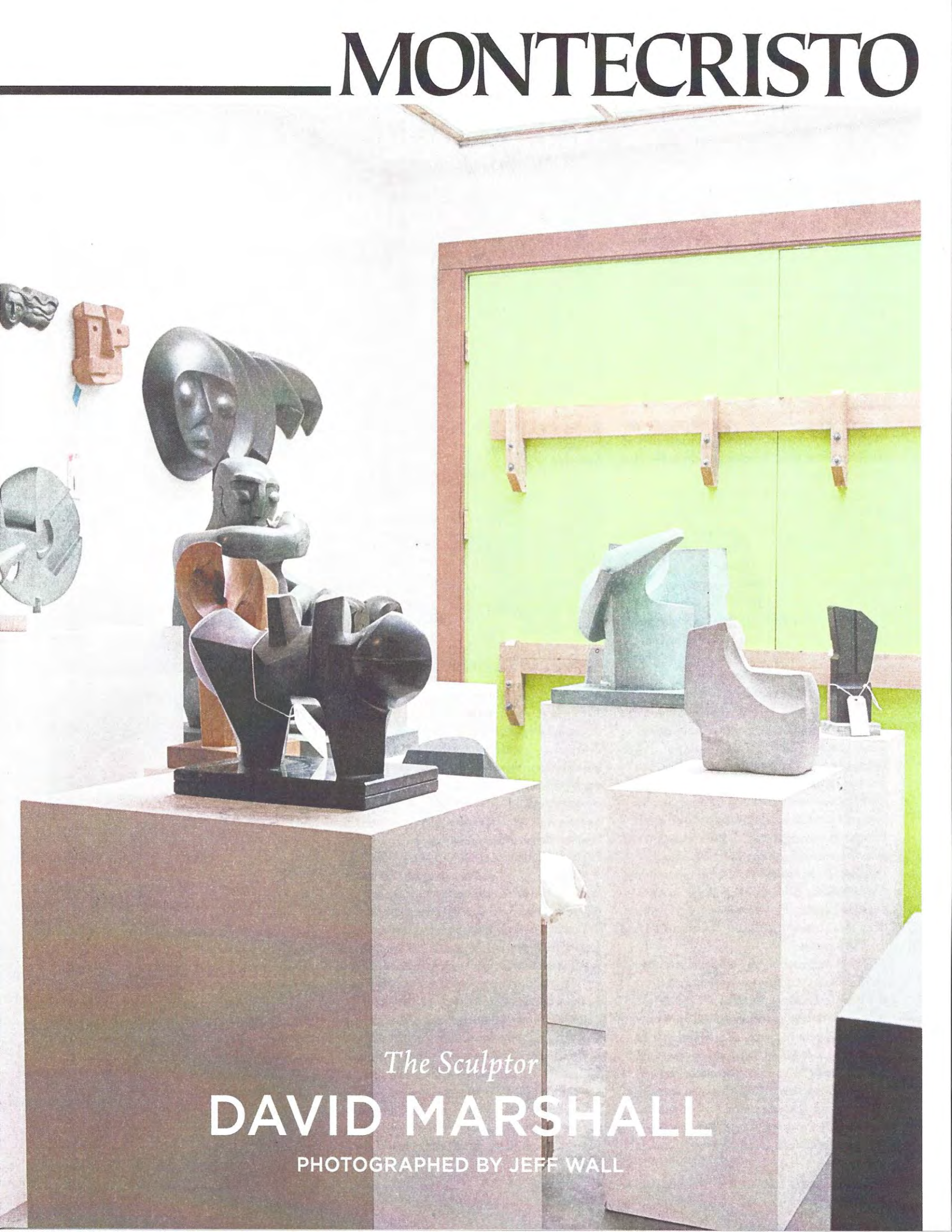


MONTECRISTO



The Sculptor

DAVID MARSHALL

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF WALL

BEAN THERE

Milano Coffee Roasters

CHANCES ARE, any encounter with Brian Turko will be memorable. And possibly leave you mildly exhausted. That's not so surprising. The driving force behind Milano Coffee Roasters sips, talks, eats, breathes, and sleeps the roasted bean.

If you're lucky enough to spot Turko when visiting one of his comfy Vancouver espresso haunts, you'll likely receive a rapidly delivered but exhaustively thorough treatise on virtually whatever caffeinated topic you choose to raise. Better still, taste through a flight of espressos with him and he'll share a wealth of information with a vocabulary of descriptors that might have just as easily hailed from the world of wine rather than coffee.

One summer's day, Turko offered a relatively brief 30-minute explanation on the intricacies of his state-of-the-art Schärff hydraulic piston machine and two Petroncini roasters, before deftly pouring a perfect espresso whose gossamer liquid proved beyond ethereal. "It's all about the cut-off," he explains, catching the unwanted drips in a spoon.

Brian Turko and his wife, Linda, caught the Vancouver coffee wave long before it became trendy. He was bitten by the bug at a time when there was virtually only one place in Vancouver where you could be guaranteed a decent cup: on the Drive. Growing up in the neighbourhood, Turko had learned a thing or two about coffee, developing a penchant for the bean as an alternative to booze. Besides, caffeine was the drink of choice for his late-night guitar sessions.

Turko is an accomplished performer, and his passion for coffee is neatly balanced by a love for music that ranges from classic rock to serious jazz. Plans are being hatched for some speakeasy-style, late-night sessions at Milano's gently funky Gastown room. And when things are really humming during roasting sessions, Turko always has a guitar handy to help pass the time. And feed the coffee muse.

Turko's appreciation for the bean is so nuanced and highly evolved that, when the subject turns to blending, his already bright eyes sparkle with unbridled fervour. That enthusiasm springs from deep within his soul, wrapped in a passion fired over 27 years. In 1993, Turko met the man who would become his mentor, Francesco Curatolo. A master *torrefazione*, Curatolo owned Café de Milano on the Drive, as well as his own roasting business. He was quick to spot Turko's highly developed palate and ability to discern nuances



and origins in blends well beyond that of most professionals, let alone the average taster.

Curatolo was briefly consulting for Starbucks at the time. Howard Schultz tried very hard to purchase his espresso recipes. However, the master roaster shunned the green and white juggernaut, eventually selling to the Turkos a few years later. By then, the couple had opened Turks Coffee, the first non-Italian independent café on Commercial Drive, and laid the foundation for today's Milano.

While Turko delights in talking and tasting espresso, he's in his element amongst the sacks of beans between the roasting machines at the Columbia Street plant. It's here that he immerses himself for hours, developing the combinations, subtleties, and layers of perfection required to come up with award-winning blends such as Milano's La Futura. In 2012, it captured the gold medal at Italy's fourth annual International Coffee Tasting Competition. Turko was thrilled with the validation.

La Futura is a progression for espresso master Turko. Innovation is always at the forefront of his mind. He points out its sweet nose above a clean, almost hidden mellow tone. "It reminds me of a really nice tequila—so clean," he says. La Futura is nuanced, floral, and petite. Almost like



an Italian wine, he suggests. "The only way I could make it better was to buy higher quality coffee and add one more. The coffees that are in there are monstrously unique," he adds, with a politely evasive wink. After five years and tastes of 1,500 combinations, he's not about to reveal the formula. "You've got to be a little abnormal to balance a dozen espresso blends so they only go forward, not backward. I don't know why I do it!"

As for what's next? "I'm working on La Una—'The One.' It's been four years so far..."

—Tim Pawsey