
The Last Word: Carol Karahadian: a Lifelong Passion for Flavor Science

Carol Karahadian, the director, global sensory at Starbucks Coffee Co. and honoree of the recent Women in Flavor & Fragrance Commerce Open Dinner, holds the flavor industry close to her heart. The daughter of a walnut grower, Karahadian was born in San Francisco and raised on a farm in Northern California's Sonoma County.

"I come from the world of agriculture—every fall I can smell the walnut harvest," Karahadian tells *P&F*. "The earth was part of life. In my quest to figure out what I wanted to do, I knew I loved the area of biology and chemistry."

Karahadian has spent numerous years working in the industry with a career path that has combined her lifelong passion for science and knowledge of food, beginning with studies in food science at University of California, Davis.

"I knew I wanted to go the University of California, Davis," says Karahadian. "We sat down with the [school] catalog and my dad said, 'well food is going to be around for a long time.' It was actually a really nice fit."

Karahadian furthered her studies and earned MS and PhD degrees in food science with an emphasis in flavor chemistry and sensory evaluation from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Robert Lindsay offered her an assistantship in the Department of Food Science, which she says piqued her interest in flavor chemistry and sensory analysis. From there, Karahadian worked as a faculty member training students in flavor chemistry and sensory evaluation at the University of Maryland in College Park, as well as Purdue University in Indiana. In 1995, she decided to leave academia and joined Firmenich, where she began working as sensory manager in the flavor division of the company's North American site.

"Working at Firmenich, there was a recognition amongst my colleagues that everyone has contributed to the success of the organization," she says.

For the next 17 years, she climbed the company ranks to eventually become vice president of global sensory and consumer research, which she managed out of the headquarters in Geneva. Using Geneva as a home base, she helped to set up a program in Asia.

"I think the cherry on the cake was the work in India," she says, adding that, in the global sensory arena, she worked with



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JP Lebudel to put together a program in which they trained Indian sensory panel experts.

"It brought local value to the community in India," Karahadian says. "We created an opportunity for people who probably wouldn't have the opportunity to work out of the home. We started in 2003, and it took about five years to get it up and running. It was pretty much an independent operation in 2008. [The training] was in Mumbai, and these ladies would commute two hours and would be there early."

In 2011, Karahadian decided it was time to move geographically closer to home, so she took on the next challenge as director, global sensory at Starbucks

Coffee Co. in Seattle. When Karahadian first began working for Starbucks, which uses a significant amount of flavors, she said its testing program was quite small. Her job was to offer her expertise for a sensory and consumer testing program for quality and consumer accessibility. The department grew quickly.

"We're working on a training program at the plants to have consistency in the description of coffee, so if something goes wrong or is amiss, [we] make sure it should be modified," says Karahadian.

When looking back on her career and reflecting on what it's like to be a decision-maker in the flavor industry, Karahadian didn't let the proverbial glass ceiling define her career path.

"My career was sort of the start [of when] it didn't matter what your gender was," she says. "If you had the skill set, you could bring value. At the higher rank, the flavor industry in general has taken a little bit longer to be inclusive of females."

Still, Karahadian says, "If you have one person that champions you, you could change the world."

Her biggest mentors in food science were Lindsay and Lebudel, among many others, which is why she's focusing on giving back to others.

"I absolutely love mentoring and to see others grow in their career and finding opportunities," says Karahadian, who volunteers her time and food science expertise at the Seattle Chapter of Expanding Your Horizons (www.seattleu.edu/sciengseyh/), a non-profit organization that helps girls in the sixth to eighth grades explore math, science and technology.

"I would love to do more international things," she adds. "[And] connecting groups of people together and giving back to others. I've been giving back, but I think I can do some more of that. My dad would always say that when you give, you're the one who gets the blessing."

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