



◀ Sustainable packaging has become a priority for Tropical Mountains over the past decade. Images: Tropical Mountains.

Beyond compostable capsules

One family-owned coffee company has taken the environmental impact of its packaging into its own hands, developing what it believes to be one of the industry's first TÜV-certified home-compostable instant coffee sachets.

WHILE LARGE CORPORATIONS have the R&D facilities and budgets required to develop new products, the most innovative ideas often originate from smaller industry players. With fewer shareholders and directors to sign off projects, there can be more freedom to experiment and explore novel opportunities.

It was this freedom – as well as an unrelenting drive to reduce packaging waste – that led Swiss coffee company Tropical Mountains to develop what it believes to be a game-changing new solution for the single-serve sector.

“The global coffee industry has made significant progress in improving the sustainability of coffee itself,” says Thomas Schwegler, Tropical Mountains Co-Founder and CEO.

“Organic farming, Fairtrade certification, regenerative agriculture, and carbon reduction have become increasingly important. Yet one major environmental challenge remains: packaging.”

Tropical Mountains has prioritised sustainable coffee production since its origins in South America in 2012.

Schwegler and Co-Founder Gisella Iriarte established the business with a coffee farm in Peru before expanding to Switzerland in 2014, where they began building the premium coffee brand in partnership with specialised roasting experts.

From the outset, the duo have prioritised organic farming and direct trade – an approach that's broadly adopted now but was niche at the time.

“We knew we couldn't compete with the big companies, so we had to do something different,” says Schwegler.

“Innovation takes a long time and requires serious investment. For a smaller company like ours, it can be a big risk.”

Thomas Schwegler,
CO-FOUNDER
TROPICAL MOUNTAINS

“We first saw the long-term benefits of organic farming on our own land in Peru. Conventional farming methods can increase yields in the short term, but the intensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides gradually depletes the soil and can damage its fertility for many years. For us, organic farming was a way to protect the land, preserve its productivity for future generations, and create lasting benefits for both our coffee and the local community.

“Over time, we gained Fairtrade and B Corp certification too. We now source coffees from all around the world using different sustainability programs. However, rather than viewing sustainability as a single certification or product feature, we approach it as a continuous process of improvement across the entire value chain.”

The hidden packaging challenge

In line with this end-to-end approach to sustainability, packaging has become a key priority for Tropical Mountains over the past decade.

In 2015, the brand introduced TÜV-certified home-compostable coffee capsules to offer its customers a practical

alternative to conventional plastic and aluminium products.

“Aluminium is a fantastic material for protecting food, but the percentage of aluminium packaging that’s effectively recycled is very low. What’s more, the production process for the metal is energy intensive and the byproducts are damaging to the environment,” says Schwegler.

Finding an alternative to traditional coffee capsules was no easy feat and the team encountered several hurdles trying to produce a compostable product, most notably ensuring a reliable oxygen barrier.

“The customer will always prioritise the quality of the product and this is the biggest challenge when exploring new packaging solutions,” says Schwegler.

“Developing more sustainable packaging is about balancing many different requirements. The material must protect the coffee, perform reliably in production, and meet the quality standards customers expect. Achieving all of this with certified home-compostable materials required years of development and close collaboration with specialised packaging partners.

“The successful launch of our home-compostable capsules gave us the confidence to take the next step. We quickly realised that another product category had received very little attention: instant coffee.”

The instant solution

Following the success of the home-compostable capsules, Tropical Mountains was approached by a large European hotel group that was looking for a home-compostable coffee sachet for its guestrooms.

Each year, billions of instant coffee sachets (or sticks) are used around the world by

hotels, airlines, offices, hospitals, catering companies, food manufacturers, and more. Most of these sachets rely on conventional plastic-based laminates because they provide the high barrier protection necessary to preserve aroma and product quality. However, these complex structures are difficult to recycle.

New and incoming legislation in Europe is tightening the rules on single-use packaging, with businesses of all shapes and sizes having to rethink their product lines. For example, the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), which entered into force in 2025, promotes packaging that is recyclable and designed for circularity, creating new challenges for traditional multi-material products.

While many coffee companies have focused on creating sustainable packaging options for capsule and bagged coffee within the retail sector, the single-serve instant coffee market has not received the same attention. Tropical Mountains saw a gap in the market.

“Single-serve coffee continues to be a fast-growing category, particularly in out-of-home environments where convenience, hygiene, and portion control are essential,” says Schwegler.

After years of development with specialised packaging partners, Tropical Mountains brought to market what it believes to be one of the industry’s first commercially available TÜV-certified home-compostable instant coffee sachets.

“The objective was ambitious: develop packaging that provides the functional performance required for premium instant coffee while using certified home-compostable materials,” he says.

“The result is a solution designed for customers who seek both convenience and a reduced environmental footprint.”

He admits the team had to overcome many challenges when developing the new compostable packaging. They even trialled the packaging at their farm in Peru, where the climate is humid, and found it performed well.

“Innovation takes a long time and requires serious investment. For a smaller company like ours, it can be a big risk,” he says.

“It took us almost two years to get the product right and ensure there was no compromise on quality. However, the additional development time was worthwhile as the feedback has been excellent.”

The company’s commitment to



▼ Co-Founders Thomas Schwegler and Gisella Iriarte established the business with a coffee farm in Peru before expanding to Switzerland in 2014.

sustainable packaging also extends beyond instant coffee. In early 2027, Tropical Mountains plans to launch a new range of ready-to-drink iced coffees in “innovative” plastic-free packaging.

The packaging is manufactured using a renewable fibre-based material derived from 75 per cent regrowing plants. According to Schwegler, it also provides an excellent oxygen and moisture barrier, helping to protect quality and deliver a shelf life of 12 months without refrigeration.

Forward thinking

While the Tropical Mountains team are very happy with their industry-first single-serve packaging, Schwegler says the company is always looking ahead to the next innovation.

“The next few years will continue to see more innovation in the sustainable packaging space. As governments and customers increasingly demand more sustainable packaging solutions moving towards net-zero targets, companies of all sizes will need to make more sustainable choices about the products they bring to market,” he says.

“Long-term thinking and collaboration will be the keys to success. We are just one small company and to achieve what we want to achieve in this space we need partner companies that are open to spending time and money creating solutions.

“In coffee, packaging is often overlooked but it’s a crucial part of the product’s overall environmental footprint. Innovation takes time, but collaboration across the value chain can help the coffee industry develop packaging solutions that deliver meaningful environmental benefits without compromising product quality.” **GCR**



▲ Tropical Mountains developed one of the first commercially available TÜV-certified home-compostable instant coffee sachets.

For more information, visit shop.tropicalmountains.com