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Oakland's Peerless Coffee still going strong

JANNY HU,
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

When George Vukasin Sr. was approached by prospective buyers more than a decade ago, he asked his suitors why they wanted to purchase his family-run Peerless Coffee & Tea business.

Because you're too old, Vukasin was told.

"And they were right. They'd done their homework," the 76-year-old patriarch concedes. "But they didn't know that these two were coming into the business," he says, pointing at his oldest daughter, Kristina, and his son, George Jr.

Peerless celebrated its 85th anniversary last month, solidifying its status as one of the Bay Area's oldest — if least known — specialty coffee companies.

Before there was Peet's or Starbucks, long before Ritual or Blue Bottle, there was a tiny shop on Washington and Ninth streets in Oakland that supplied premium coffee to local restaurants and hotels.

Peerless has since moved into larger digs a mile away, but its clientele is hardly diluted. It's the house coffee at Cyrus in Healdsburg and Gary Danko in San Francisco, supplies several Four Seasons hotels and can be found at other Bay Area establishments.

You just have to dig a little. The Vukasins aren't the type to announce their presence over a loudspeaker.

John Vukasinovich was just a teenager when he immigrated to the United States from Yugoslavia in the early 1900s. After working in the Nevada gold mines, he settled in Oakland and founded Peerless Coffee Co. in 1924. When Vukasinovich died (the name was shortened), Vukasin and his wife, Sonja, took over, building its warehouse on Oak and Third streets in 1975.

Today, Peerless is an Oakland institution, much like George Sr., who has served as the city's port commissioner, councilman and coliseum president.



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

George Vukasin Sr. and Jr. sample brews at their Peerless Coffee & Tea store in Oakland.

The company headquarters span nearly an entire block. There's the machinery room, where beans are roasted all day, every day; a retail store, where customers can buy coffee by the pound or cup; even a museum that houses Sonja's collection of coffee artifacts.

Once again, the children are running the show. George Jr., 37, will officially succeed Sonja as president on Jan. 1, and Kristina, 42, the company's general counsel, will become the executive vice president of administration.

Father, mother, brother and sister are all staples at the office, and on any given day, they can be found leading tours, closing deals, butting heads, making compromises and, of course, drinking coffee.

"Eight to 10 cups a day," says George Jr., holding out his hands. "No shaking."

Equally notable is Peerless' longevity. While most dominant Bay Area coffee companies of the 1930s and 1940s — Folger's and Hills Bros., for example — either sold or went out of business, Peerless has remained family-owned for nearly a century.

While the Bay Area is teeming with a

Peerless Coffee & Tea:

260 Oak St., Oakland.
(800) 310-5662.

The retail gift store and coffee shop is open 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. weekdays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays.

An additional espresso bar is open 6:30-10:30 a.m. weekdays.

For tours of the museum, call ahead or e-mail tours@peerlesscoffee.com.

new generation of artisan roasters like Verve, Ritual and Blue Bottle — which just opened a store in Oakland around the corner from Peerless — the Vukasins say the more, the merrier.

For them, crafting the perfect cup of coffee is both a science and an art. Even beans from the same region can vary wildly, as different elevations lead to different densities which lead to different roasting preferences.

"If you cook a fillet and a T-bone at the same temperature for the same time in the same oven, they're going to cook differently," George Jr. explains. "It's the same thing with coffee."

Peerless Coffee

And it's that winelike blending and appreciation that has top Bay Area restaurateurs swearing by Peerless.

Cyrus co-owner Nick Peyton became familiar with the Vukasins when he managed the Dining Room at the Ritz Carlton in the 1990s. Since then, Peyton has offered their coffee wherever he has worked — Gary Danko and now Cyrus.

"They've constantly evolved with me," Peyton says. "We've done earthy, chocolate-y blends of Indonesian coffees. We've used Ethiopian coffees to highlight bright acidity. We've worked with Central American coffees to get a nice smooth finish."

Over the years, Peyton has made several trips to Peerless' headquarters to cup coffee with the Vukasins. It's there that he settled on Cyrus' current offering — a single-origin Finca Irlanda from Chiapas, Mexico.

Peerless' cupping room, in fact, might be the most charming around, with the same furniture that John Vukasinovich used decades ago lining its cramped quarters, along with a shiny new spittoon — essential for cupping.

"We thought for hygienic purposes, we should retire the old one," jokes George Jr.

Perhaps it will last into the next generation — there's already a fourth in the wings. Will Kristina's oldest son, 7-year-old John William, become the family's next great cupper?

"I hope," George Jr. says with smile. "Bring him on."



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

Peerless Coffee and Tea in Oakland is a family-owned coffee roasting company that has just celebrated its 85-year anniversary. George Vukasin Sr., is joined in the Oakland warehouse by his family, wife Sonja Vukasin, daughter Kristina Vukasin-Brouhard and son George Vukasin Jr.