

roast



M A G A Z I N E

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George Vukasin Jr. | BY EMILY PURO

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PEERLESS COFFEE & TEA



LEFT In the roastery with the Vukasin Family, circa 2010. From left: Sonja, George Sr., Kristina and George Jr. **RIGHT** George Jr. tasting coffee.

In many ways, the specialty coffee industry feels like a big extended family, as veteran coffee professionals have learned together, worked together, traveled together and “grown up” together for decades. But within the industry, there are a remarkable number of true family businesses, passed down from parents to children over generations.

Peerless Coffee & Tea in Oakland, California, is one of those businesses. John Vukasin founded Peerless Coffee Company in 1924 to supply local hotels and restaurants with exceptional, freshly roasted coffee. His son George joined the company in 1957, and after John retired, George and his wife, Sonja, took over. Today, two of their children—George Vukasin Jr. and Kristina Brouhard—run the family business, still a mainstay of the West Coast hospitality industry.

Before joining the family business, George Jr. gained formal culinary training at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. He has served on the board of directors for the National Coffee Association USA and is a past president of the Pacific Coast Coffee Association. As CEO of Peerless, he still roasts a special curated coffee series and oversees green buying for the company. I recently had the pleasure of sharing lunch and locally roasted Marigold Coffee with him at Jam on Hawthorne in Portland, Oregon.

Emily Puro: How did you get your start in coffee?

George Vukasin Jr.: My dad was one of two sons, and they both went to college, the first people in my family who went to college. The oldest son went on to law school and became an attorney, so that left my dad as the chosen one to take over the business. He did not want to go into it. He was a criminology major. He wanted to join the FBI, but being the dutiful son, he went into the business. That turned out to be probably the best thing he could have done,

but because of that experience he was very hands-off with my two older sisters and me. Other than working summers and learning how to roast and cup with my dad, he was very hands-off, find your own path.

By the time I graduated college, probably junior year, I knew I wanted to go into coffee. I wanted to go to cooking school first, knowing that if I didn't do it then there was no way I would do it later, and after I graduated [from Le Cordon Bleu] I moved to Mexico and started my coffee career.

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TOP George Vukasin Sr. in Colombia, 1978.

BOTTOM George Jr. cupping at the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation lab.



EP: What did you do in Mexico?

GV: I figured my first job was going to be kind of an apprentice under my dad in coffee buying. In our business, it's always been a family member who bought the coffee—my grandfather, my dad, and now me. So I said, if I'm going to do that, I want to know where it comes from, so I moved to Mexico and worked for a coffee exporter. I lived in Chiapas and Oaxaca. That was '96 to '97. I lived on farms and mills and just saw the whole process.

EP: What are some of the most important changes you've seen in the coffee industry?

GV: First, being a family business, there are significantly fewer traditional family coffee roasters left. They seem to be falling by the wayside through acquisition or what have you. That's not good or bad. That's just something I see. Granted there are a lot of newer family businesses ... but I'm a bit of a romantic about family businesses, just because I'm in one, so it's a little sad to see, particularly how some of them are ending.

I also think that quality coffee—I'm not saying 90-scoring coffees, but low 80s, mid 80s—is much more available now than 20 years ago, which is awesome. I think a lot of that is just growers, not all but a lot, have been educated that quality can

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George Jr. checking the beans at Finca El Faro in Guatemala, 2003.

improve prices for them. A lot of roasters have done a really good job of trying to instill that and incentivize the higher-quality coffee.

On the flip side, I think, is that while globalization has some positives—shared knowledge among farms in terms of best practices and that kind of thing—I think it's also in some cases created almost a blandness in certain traditional origins, a uniformity. We're an old-school Sumatra coffee roaster. We like the real earthy, syrupy coffees, which are harder and harder to find, because most producers or exporters want to create a cleaner cup so they can market it to some of the larger coffee roasters. I understand why they're doing it, but I think it's also changing the taste profiles of a lot of coffees, which is unfortunate.

EP: How do you think the definition of “quality” in coffee has changed?

GV: A couple different ways: One is, when I was starting out, you could find really high-quality coffees without the really high-quality definition, because a lot of the individual farms—this is kind of pre-estate coffee—they would be blended at a mill, so your hard bean coffees out of Guatemala would cup like today's strictly hard bean coffees.

Another change is that you can find uber-high-end coffee literally from every country, which wasn't possible 20 years ago, and a lot of that [has happened because of] investments by various roasters or NGOs. So I think the word about quality coffee has permeated into pretty much every origin.

And then there's this whole scoring system, which is a good base for choosing quality, but my 86 could be someone's 84 could be someone's 90, so there's still I think a lack of calibration. I don't know if you're ever going to achieve it, just because there are so many people in coffee these days, but I think it does at least specify or formalize the expectation, and then it's really up to the cupper to calibrate against their own version of a quality coffee.

EP: What are you most excited about in the world of coffee right now?

GV: I love change. I thrive on it, and every day there's something new in coffee. That's been true for 20 years, but it's so much more rapid now—whether it's what's happening at origin, all the experimentation in terms of processing, or whether it's new roasters popping up literally every single day, and not just in core coffee cities, probably virtually every mid[size] to large city in the country, and you can expand that beyond our country, obviously. That's just pushing things further and further, pushing the story of quality, and not just the quality of coffee, but the quality of presentation, the quality of service, which fortunately people are now focusing on a little more. Being a company with the legacy that we have, it invigorates me to continually refine, evolve my company, and make sure it continues to thrive.

EP: Do you have a favorite roasting-related advancement in technology?

GV: I still roast. I roast about one day a week. We have a hand-roasted menu that I do. It's a 2-pound menu, and I roast a pound at a time. I have a curated selection of coffees, and I do it old school. There's no technology involved in how I hand-roast. That's just where I'm from and how I've learned.



Peerless founders John and Natalie Vukasin.

EP: What do you roast on?

GV: I roast on two different sample roasters and big roasters. The two smaller sample roasters, which are the 1-pound type coffees, are a Jabez Burns and a Probat. I alternate depending on what I'm trying to go after, which is always fun because it adds a level of experimentation. In the larger roasters we also have a Burns and a Probat. We fluctuate between the two, depending on the type of coffees we're roasting, because our experience—my experience and my dad's and grandfather's, and I think most roasters would agree—is that you can achieve different flavor profiles on different roasters using different methodologies. We experiment a lot.

A lot of our business is focused on hospitality. We do a lot of custom or proprietary or bespoke roasts and blends, depending on the clientele. If all I wanted to offer was 15 of the greatest coffees in the world according to me, I might not need the ability to experiment as much, but because I'll sit down with a chef and they have a particular vision of the flavor profile they want, having more options on how to get from point A to point Z allows me to do my job better.

EP: How has your culinary background influenced you as a roaster?



George Jr. graduates from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, 1996.

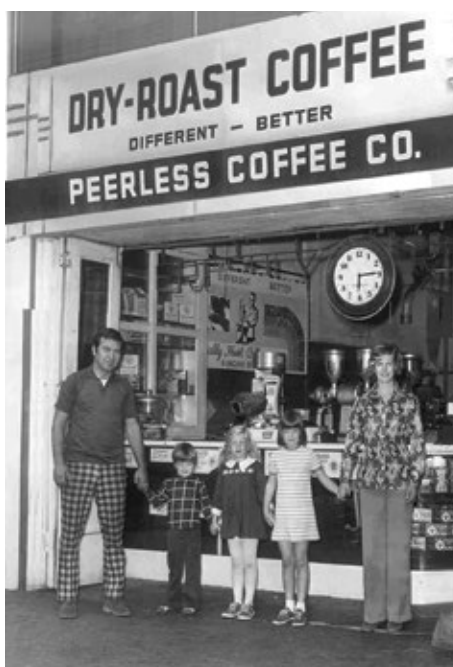
GV: It dovetails perfectly in the type of business we service. I work with chefs all the time, and although I don't proclaim myself a chef, I have the training, so there's that aspect of it.

Then from a roasting point of view—and this is not just roasting but blending, blend creation, sourcing single-origins, whatever it may be—it's taking a set of ingredients and figuring out how to put them together in a way that it allows the best taste characteristics to shine once it reaches someone's cup. I think being able to cook has helped me, I won't say learn it, but it's helped me organize it in my head so I can execute it pretty well.

EP: Do you have a top “wow” cup of coffee?

GV: That's a tough question! I've had a lot of great cups of coffee, some of which we've roasted, some of which other roasters have roasted. It's probably more about the setting than it is the coffee. I remember cupping coffee with my dad in our cupping room, and that's probably one of the greatest memories I have, sitting with my mentor and my best friend, so pretty much every cup I cupped was awesome for that reason. I'm sure they weren't all from a quality perspective.

A lot of it is more situational. I'm a traditionalist or a romantic when it comes to coffee, so I like particular origins because of their historical importance in specialty coffee, whether it's Kenyans or Ethiopians or Sumatrans or Guatemalans, whatever it may be. When I have a cup of coffee that perfectly distills the historical taste profile, to me that's a great cup of coffee.



George Sr. (left) and Sonja (right) with their three children, at the original Peerless Coffee location, 1975.



The fourth generation: George Vukasin III displaying his first roast, age 5.