

A century on, Peerless Coffee is still 'bullish' on Oakland - San Francisco Business Times

May. 7th, 2024

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Oakland roastery Peerless Coffee & Tea turns 100 years old this year and remains as committed as ever to its homespun values and hometown.

The veteran coffee wholesaler is now in its third generation of family leadership. It annually churns more than three million pounds of roast beans and \$33 million revenue from the headquarters, café and roastery complex it owns in Jack London Square, where it employs 68 people. CEO George Vukasin Jr. remains "bullish" on the city of Oakland — in spite of its challenges for businesses like property crime, which Peerless is no stranger to — and credits the perspective to their richly intertwined histories.

"Oakland has been very good to our family," Vukasin said in a recent interview at Peerless's headquarters, alongside his older sister (and Peerless's vice president of administration and legal counsel) Kristina Vukasin-Brouhard. "We've seen this city take giant leaps and then unfortunately fall a step or two back. But when the right changes happen, this city is going to explode."

Vukasin's grandfather, John, founded Peerless as a young Yugoslavian immigrant in 1924. Then his own father, George, expanded the business while moonlighting a career in local politics — acting as city government's liaison to the Black Panthers in the early '70s and helping woo the Raiders back to the Coliseum in the '90s, in various roles as a city council member, vice mayor, and Chamber of Commerce president.

The second generation Vukasins moved the business from Washington Street to its current home at 260 Oak St. in 1975, and gradually expanded it to today's four buildings and roughly 75,000 square feet spanning a full city block. A two-room, onsite museum houses a century's worth of global coffee memorabilia and artifacts compiled by George's and Kristina's mother Sonja — and arranged with the help of Oakland Museum designer Ted Cohen.

"He was never someone that really kind of dwelled on the past," Vukasin described his father, who passed away in [2016](#), in a recent interview at Peerless headquarters. "He was always forward thinking and moving forward."

That extended to the passing of the torch. For years, George and Kristina's parents urged them to get a taste of the world, first, before deciding if they wanted to run the family business.

George graduated from the UC Berkeley and Paris's Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, then took a year learning the coffee export business on site in Mexico before [taking on the CEO role in 2006](#). Kristina got a law degree from Santa Clara University, then served in the Alameda County District Attorney's office as a deputy DA from 1993 to 1998 before turning her eye homeward to become Peerless's legal counsel.

The brother and sister acquired the business in 2010 for an undisclosed price — but needed to raise capital on their own first.

"It was very important to them that nothing is given and it has to be earned," George said.

A through line for the century has been Peerless's emphasis on quality product, helping it today maintain a network of wholesale relationships that's grown to more than 4,000 accounts — cafes, white tablecloth restaurants, hotels, and retail grocery stores across California and parts of Nevada and Oregon.

In 2019 Peerless was awarded “Macro Roaster of the Year” by trade publication *Roast Magazine*, celebrating its longevity and efforts to reduce its environmental impact. Since 2000 the company has been Fair Trade certified and was Alameda County’s first “Green Business” designated coffee supplier.

Grocery has been the company’s biggest growth segment in recent years, accelerated by more shoppers buying in bulk. Retail — including its two sub-brands, Landmark Coffee and Adams Organic Coffee — now make up about 40% of wholesale volume compared with 30% pre-Covid, with the rest of the pie in hospitality.

Vukasin said when the economy turns ugly — as it did for Peerless in the 2020 pandemic, necessitating layoffs — one adjustment could have been to cut costs at the expense of the final product. But that just wasn’t how he was raised.

“I’m not inclined to even think about it because we grew up with that mantra of good quality,” the CEO said. “If there’s one reason we’re turning 100 it’s the people we have working here, and that we still roast really great coffee.”

To commemorate reaching the century mark, Peerless released its first [Regenerative Organic Certified](#) blend earlier this year and began an ongoing charity drive that sends a portion of its café sales to Boys & Girls Clubs of Oakland.

Vukasin acknowledged that in the past he’s thought about the potential benefits to relocating Peerless from the Bay Area — operational savings in a number of areas, including labor — but said “we’ve never seriously considered it.” Peerless has outlasted the presence of its original Bay Area contemporaries in Folgers and Hill Brothers (out of San Francisco) and says it stays on its toes surrounded by third-wavers like Blue Bottle and so many smaller upstarts out of Oakland.

“This is where coffee movements happen. It’s the tip of the spear,” Vukasin said. “Being here forces us to stay up at night and think about how we stay alive, how we stay relevant.”

<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2024/05/07/peerless-coffee-tea-oakland-turns-100.html>