

Family, quality prove best blend

Highland Park coffee roaster Becharas has been in family since 1914.

By Eric Pope

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HIGHLAND PARK — Dean Becharas Sr. decided the best way to keep Becharas Brothers Coffee Co. in the family was to get his four children involved when they were young.

Becharas was 15 when he went to work for his two uncles, who founded the 90-year-old company. He got his four children involved at a much earlier age, beginning when first-born son Nick was just 6 years old.

"That was before they had child labor laws," Becharas joked.

Nick Becharas, 41, returned to the company right after graduating from Michigan State University, and

his sister Stephanie, 38, started the same year. Sister Demi, 33, joined the staff three years ago, and brother Dean Jr., 28, recently returned after working in New York City for five years.

Already, Nick and Demi are bringing their own young children to work.

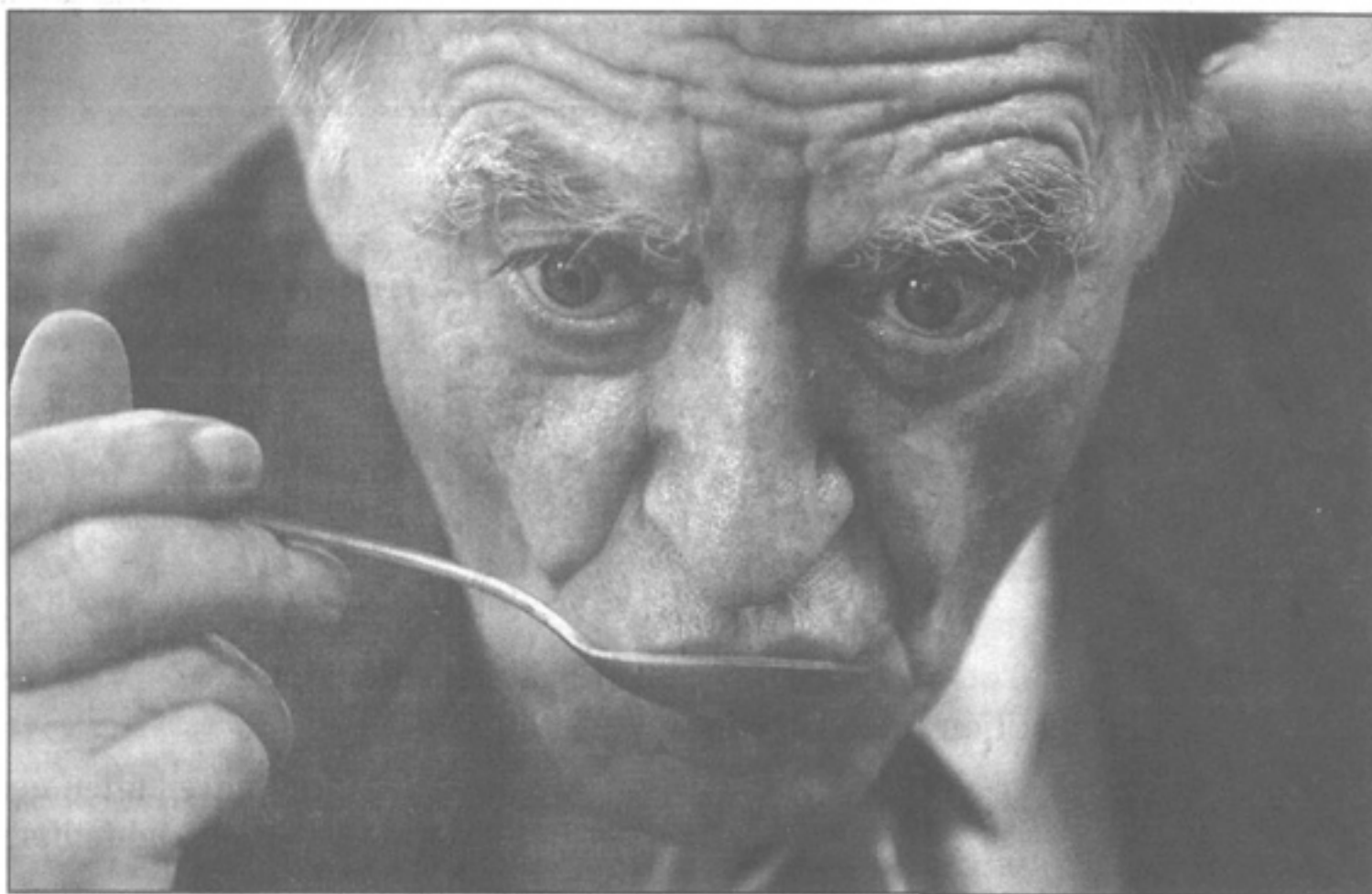
In an industry that has seen major consolidation, Becharas Brothers is the largest remaining coffee roaster in Metro Detroit. Once the U.S. Army's top coffee supplier, the company has overcome the loss of big military contracts by finding new markets, according to Nick Becharas, who took over as president three years ago.

Now the bulk of the business comes from restaurants, convenience stores, hospitals and coffee services. The company sells its Royal York blend to more than 500 restaurants in Metro Detroit and produces private-label brands sold in seven states.

Strict attention to quality is a family tradition. Every morning the father and two sons go through an elaborate cupping ritual that has been practiced in the coffee industry for more than 300 years. Dean Becharas Sr. learned the process from his uncle and now he is passing it on to his sons.

The three men check the aroma and then sample the taste by slurping coffee to the back of their palates. They evaluate samples before placing orders three and four months in advance of delivery and also check the quality of freshly roasted coffee ready for delivery to customers.

Such attention to detail has kept Big Boy restaurants as a customer for



Photos by John Greilick / The Detroit News

Dean Becharas Sr. uses a golden spoon to taste coffee each morning in a ritual called "cupping" that assures the quality of the coffee made by Becharas Brothers Coffee Co. of Michigan.



Dean Becharas Sr. sits at a 130-year-old lazy susan table to smell and taste samples of coffee manufactured by Becharas Brothers Coffee.

46 years.

"They never ever waver on their quality," said Tony Michaels, CEO of Big Boy Food Group LLC in Warren, noting that the coffee always rates high in Big Boy customer surveys. "They have a real hands-on approach to their product. You know that they are always there taking care of it."

According to Hank Dunlop, CEO of Atlantic (USA) Inc., a coffee importer in New York City, 95 percent of regional coffee roasters have gone out of

business over the past 50 years, and survivors such as Becharas Brothers Coffee remain in business by making quality and service their business plan.

"They hit that high standard for quality and service on a daily basis," Dunlop said.

Nick Becharas said the company has been able to maintain its reputation by refusing to "blend to the bottom line" or cut corners to underbid competitors.

"My father has always told me that

Becharas Brothers Coffee Co.

Founded: 1914

Location: Highland Park

2003 sales: \$7 million

Employees: 25

any account you get because of price, you're going to lose because of price," he said.

Another family tradition is innovation in the production process. Dean Becharas Sr. designed the 45-year-old plant on Hamilton in Highland Park and developed new blending equipment, and, in the past two years, the younger generation has added new packaging equipment.

It takes just seven workers to roast and package 70,000 pounds a day, and the overall staff has been reduced from 60 to 25 since the 1960s while volume has increased tenfold.

The goal of keeping the business in the family for another generation has prompted the Becharases to turn down several offers to buy the company.

"We like seeing our name on the building," Nick Becharas said.

Eric Pope is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.