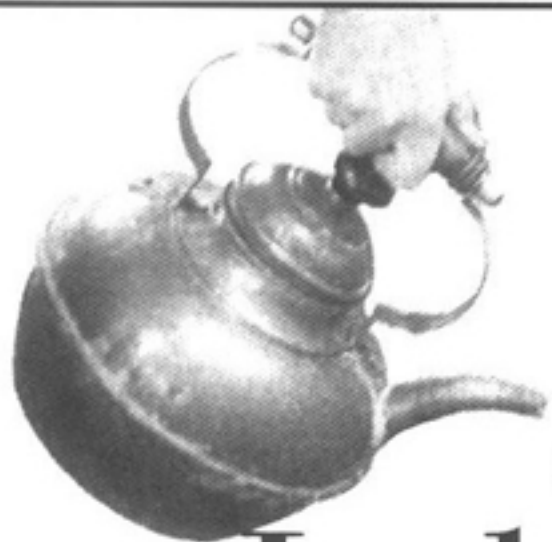


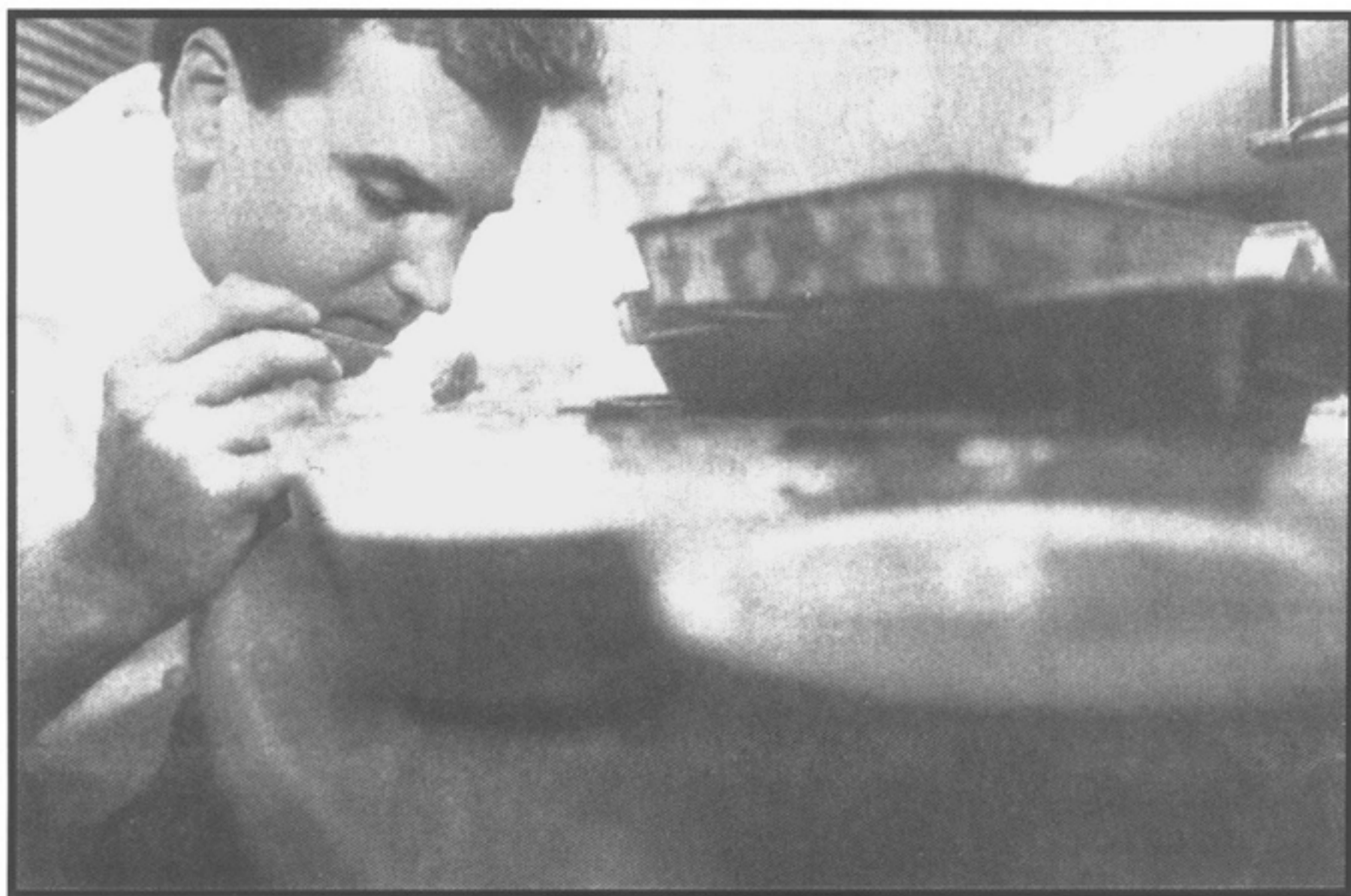
What we go through each day at Becharas Brothers Coffee Company to bring you "The Taste of Excellence." as seen in The Detroit Free Press June 8, 1994



# The Judges of

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AT DETROIT'S ONLY LARGE-SCALE  
COFFEE ROASTER, THREE MEN  
DECIDE WHETHER BEANS ARE  
GOOD ENOUGH TO BREW



DANIEL LIPPITT/Detroit Free Press

Nick Becharas, vice president and third-generation cupper of Becharas Brothers Coffee Co. of Michigan, is one of three taste-testers for the firm.

BY PATTY LANOUE STEARNS  
Free Press Food Writer

**E**very weekday at precisely 8:30 a.m., three men sit down in Highland Park to a ritual that has been performed around the world exactly the same way for the last 250 years: the time-honored task of coffee cupping.

As prices skyrocket to their highest point in seven years in a volatile coffee market that relies on such countries in turmoil as Rwanda, Haiti and Mexico for its supplies, coffee drinkers can depend on people like Dean Becharas, his son Nicholas Becharas and his uncle Telmer Constan for their steady nerves and sensitive palates.

They're among fewer than 50 cuppers — the coffee world equivalent of wine tasters — around the country whose palates determine the blends that our coffee-clamoring nation consumes each day.

"Coffee cupping is an art form — really a lost art," says 31-year-old Nicholas Becharas, vice president and third-generation cupper of Becharas Brothers Coffee Co. of Michigan. The Highland Park roaster and processor has been part of Detroit's coffee scene for the past 80 years.

"It's not something they have classes on or anything like that," continues Becharas, whose father taught him. "You cannot put a



Telmer Constan, left, and company president Dean Becharas are the other tasters.

Recipes for two tasty coffee drinks, Mocha Almond Biscotti, Banana Nut Bread and Coffee Cake are on Page 4D.

See COFFEE, Page 4D

# Coffee-tasting is a daily ritual at roaster firm

COFFEE, from Page 1D

sample of green coffee beans into a computer and it will spit out that these are good, these are bad. What we buy and use and roast with is still left up to people's taste buds. It's trial and error."

Becharas Brothers' Royal York blends are sipped by everyone from Big Boy restaurant customers to office workers to Armed Forces personnel.

"We like to say we were gourmet roasters before anyone was doing gourmet blends," Nick Becharas brags, noting that his company was the first to bring 100 percent Colombian coffee into the Detroit market.

## The aroma

Drive anywhere within a quarter-mile radius of the Becharas facility on Hamilton and catch a snootful of the wonderful aroma of roasting coffee that permeates the air. Inside, half a million pounds of raw coffee is stored; every 10 minutes, 1,600 pounds of coffee is roasted.

Though the surrounding neighborhood has seen better days, Nick Becharas says his family is there to stay, bars on the windows and all. They like the idea that they're the last large-scale roaster in metro Detroit. Indeed, they're one of only a handful of roasters in the state.

Royal York's not the pricey stuff from small-scale roasters that you find in gilded bins at supermarkets and specialty stores. While the company doesn't produce specialty coffees, it sells roasted beans to companies that do flavoring.

It's a big-volume roast — a smooth, consistent, quality blend, exactly the taste that these guys are looking for when they're deep into their cups. We're talking 100 cups a day.

## The ritual

In a second-floor conference room decorated with images of Colombian java icon Juan Valdez and a wall display featuring good and bad beans, the Becharas cuppers position themselves around a 120-year-old coffee cupping table with a lazy susan. It is stacked with samples of green beans, roasted beans, ground beans and little Pyrex cups, three per sample.

Nick Becharas explains that he relies on an independent sampler in New York to go into a warehouse, get 25 bags and come up with a composite sample. Then he sends Becharas Brothers a pound of that sample, which the cuppers either approve or nix.

The sample is roasted in a small, ancient-looking gas-fired roaster in the

## JUST A CUPPA FACTS, MA'AM

Some fast facts about U.S. coffee consumption:

- The United States consumes more java than any other country on the planet.
- The average American over the age of 10 drinks 1.87 cups of coffee daily.
- Consumption rose 7 percent in 1993.
- Specialty blends and flavored

beans accounted for \$1.5 billion in 1993 sales.

- More than one-third of coffee brewed in the United States will be specialty or flavored by the end of the decade.
- Because of shortages caused by unrest in coffee-producing nations, consumers soon will pay as much as 7 percent more for Jamaican Blue Mountain and other varieties, experts say.

Sources: National Coffee Association; Specialty Coffee Association of America.

conference room near the cupping table. Afterward, the trio inspect the beans for even roasting, uniform color and imperfections, then grind them and put five grams into each of the Pyrex cups.

"We use Pyrex because there is no metallic taste or anything like that," explains Nick Becharas, who has been cupping since he was 14 years old, "and the lady who washes the cups is not allowed to wear any hand cream or anything like that — they're all washed with light soap and water so as not to affect the taste and smell of the coffee."

Next, the men pour boiling water over the grounds, which rise to the top of the cup, almost forming a crust. When the grounds settle to the bottom, they stir the brew, which brings up the aroma. This is known as "breaking" the cup.

"There are basic problems in all coffees," Becharas says. "It may be a sourness, an earthy taste, a moldy, musty aroma. There are a whole range of characteristics that you could identify."

Using 60-year-old gold spoons that belonged to the late company founder, Nicholas Becharas, Dean's uncle and Nick's namesake, the three men skim off the foam that rises to the top of each cup, which adversely affects the taste.

## The tasting

Dean Becharas, the 59-year-old president of the company, who left his native Greece and joined his uncle's company at the tender age of 15 — takes a quick slurp, then sprays — or trills — the hot liquid onto the back of his tongue.

"We are aerating the coffee," Nick explains, "taking all the oxygen out and spraying our palate. The reason we slurp it like this is we take all the saliva out. We slurp it in, spray the back of our mouths where our palate is most

sensitive, where all the taste buds are, and we void the sample very quickly."

In other words: SLURP! SPIT! SLURP! SPIT!

If it weren't so disarming, the sight of these grown men making what amounts to locker-room noises might be downright disgusting.

But after all, it's their job.

None of these people appear to have coffee-related tremors.

"If we swallowed every sample, either our hearts would stop or our stomach lining wouldn't be very good," Nick Becharas laughs, noting that his father Dean drinks the most cups among the cuppers — 20 to 25 a day.

Slurp, spit, slurp, spit.

"We usually don't talk to each other while we do this," Nick says, though he needn't explain. "And," he adds, "we usually agree on all of this 100 percent." Dean has the final word, however.

## The third cup

The three cups in front of each sample represent 40,000 pounds of coffee. "If the first and second cups are good, but if in the third we get fermentation or a dirty kind of a taste to it, we know in that lot there's problems."

They want all three cups to be uniform, he says. "If one isn't, then we put six cups. If we get two or three out of the six that are not uniform, then we will reject the coffee."

At the end of the day, they cup not only the samples they're going to buy,

but others that Becharas produces during the day. And they sample cups from their competitors, too.

Clearly, these fellows know a good cuppa Joe from a bad one, a bitter taste from sour.

Between them, they have spent 100 years slurping and spitting, deciding on the fate of all those beans that sit in burlap bags, waiting for judgment day.

It's not a job everyone could handle. Depending on the way you look at it, this cupping thing could be Java Heaven — or Java Hell.

So the next time you relax with that warm cup of liquid gold, remember how it came to be, and thank Dean, Tel and Nick for laying their lips on the line.