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Paramount Coffee keeps up with growing, changing tastes

By Jeremy W. Steele
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From the outside, the complex at 130 N. Larch St. looks like it could belong to just about any business.

It could be mistaken for a metal shop or manufacturer - except that no shop smells quite like this. On any given day, a distinctive, nonindustrial aroma percolates from Paramount Coffee Co.'s 80,000-square-foot roasting plant into the surrounding neighborhood.

It's been an odoriferous experience for Lansing since the company started roasting its own beans in 1950.

Many changes

It was one of the first big changes for Paramount, founded in 1934. And more than 70 years after Chicago coffee salesman David Radway and Lawrence Weingarten started their already-roasted and ground coffee business with a \$2,000 investment, change is becoming the order of the day.

Ground coffee is still Paramount's core product, but the age of gourmet beans and coffeehouses has vastly changed the way the company does business.

"The main difficulty is just in managing



(Photo by BECKY SHINK/Lansing State Journal)
Stacked high: Bags of coffee beans are stacked at Paramount Coffee in Lansing. The company uses coffee beans from around the world - from Brazil to Rwanda to the Galapagos Islands - to make any number of brews. The company also adds flavorings to some lines.

A cup of history

- 1935: Chicago coffee salesman David Radway and Lawrence Weingarten start Paramount Coffee Co. in Lansing.
- 1943: Paramount buys 130-136 N. Larch St., tripling its space from the storefront where it had operated from at 1210 Turner St.
- 1950: Paramount builds its own roasting plant, growing from a distributor.
- 1965: Paramount expands for the fifth time and reports \$1.5 million in sales.
- 1986: Production of gourmet coffees begins. Paramount opens a gourmet coffee retail shop, although it later closes it to avoid competing with its retail customers.
- 1995: City officials strike a deal to buy Paramount's service garage so it can build Oldsmobile Park.
- 2000: The Radway family sells Paramount to its employees.
- 2006: Walker-based Meijer Inc. begins selling bags of Paramount-roasted Beamer's Gourmet Coffee at its stores.
- 2007: Paramount hires Acosta Sales and Marketing, a national retail food industry broker, to help get its coffees into grocery stores and other retailers from Florida to

inventories," said Angelo Oricchio, Paramount's chairman and chief executive officer. "Just in flavors, we may have 100 easily. Add in different packaging sizes and it can make anyone crazy."

Michigan.

Source: Paramount Coffee Co. and Lansing State Journal archives

Photo Gallery:

Paramount

It's easy to see why. Oricchio and his team use coffee beans from around the world - from Brazil to Rwanda to the Galapagos Islands - to make any number of brews.

They also add flavorings - from chocolate to vanilla to Traverse City cherry - to some of their ground and whole bean coffees.

Expanding sales

Paramount began working with such product lines in 1986.

"Over the years, that was an important growing role of our business," said Oricchio, a native of Brazil who joined Paramount in 1991 and remains the company's chief taster and coffee buyer. "It's been a good ride."

Company officials now hope they can take Paramount, employee-owned since 2000, to another level. They recently hired Jacksonville, Fla.-based Acosta Sales and Marketing Co. to market Paramount coffee to retailers throughout the Midwest and Southeast.

It will be Paramount's first venture beyond Michigan and northern Ohio and Indiana. It also marks a move by the company to expand from its core business of direct coffee deliveries to offices, restaurants and convenience stores.

"The more places we have our brand on the shelf, the better opportunities we have to grow our business in offices and restaurants," Paramount President Steve Morris said.

Beaner's connection

Locally, Paramount is perhaps best known for roasting Beaner's Gourmet Coffee's exclusive brews.

It's a relationship the East Lansing-based coffeehouse chain started with Paramount in 1999, when Beaner's started franchising its stores.

That year, Paramount roasted 20,000 pounds of coffee for the fledgling chain, Beaner's CEO Bob Fish said. By the end of 2007, Fish expects his company will need 500,000 pounds to fuel the 65 Beaner's now open and 70 others under development, in addition to Beaner's-branded bagged coffees at local retailers and Meijer Inc. stores.

"It could have been anywhere in Michigan," Fish said, "and I've been in every roasting facility there is in Michigan and in parts of Indiana and Ohio.

"Paramount had a unique set of physical assets - that is, types of roasters - and unique skill set within the organization."

Other endeavors

The company has a customer base of 2,500 to 3,000, most of whom have Paramount-branded coffee delivered to them, said Morris, who declined to give revenue figures for the employee-owned company.

But the business also has several other product lines. It repairs coffee equipment for restaurants and coffee shops and runs a training program for people looking to open a coffeehouse.

One of its growing segments is roasting exclusive lines of coffee for chains such as Beaner's, Ann Arbor-based Sweetwaters Coffee & Tea and Chelsea-based Bearclaw Coffee Co.

"When we go talk to somebody about coffees, we should be able to fulfill their needs," Morris said.

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