

Culinary Thymes

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A Spring Fling



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Lone Star Roasts

by Alyce Eyster

H. MILLS DUNCAN IV BEGAN drinking coffee at a young age. One of his earliest experiences with the black stuff was the coffee service following church on Sunday, where young Mills sampled his first cup of joe at a palatable ratio of 1/2 coffee to 1/2 sugar. Coffee is in his blood and in 1997 Duncan IV re-established the Duncan Coffee Company, originally started by his great-grandfather.

After venturing to Houston in 1900 and working for his uncle at Maxwell House, Herschel Mills Duncan formed the original Duncan Coffee Company in 1918. Duncan created special blends that were initially served exclusively in the finest restaurants, hotels and hotel dining cars and earned a reputation for quality and freshness. Duncan died in 1957, and the company was sold, bought back by a Duncan family member, then later sold to Coca-Cola. None of the original brands—Bright & Early, Admiration and Maryland Club—is still in production.

H. Mills Duncan IV always said he wanted to start Duncan Coffee Company and in 1997, he left a successful career in commercial real estate to do just that. Duncan Coffee Company prides itself in its high quality, fresh roasted beans. It is what one might call a “boutique” coffee company. The company roasts 20,000 pounds of coffee a month, compared to 1 million pounds of a large coffee company.

Quality and personal touches are paramount to Duncan IV. Duncan’s client list is telling—Houston’s Café Annie, Pesce, Ouisie’s Table, River Oaks Country Club, Damian’s, Carrabba’s, Houston’s—it reads like a who’s who of Houston’s finer restaurants and chefs. But before Duncan IV was able to pick up these accounts, it was Augie Bering of hardware and home furnishings emporium Bering’s who gave Duncan IV his first big break in 1997. Duncan coffee is sold under the Bering’s label in Houston and San Antonio.

From coffee brokers, Duncan buys high grade beans that have been hand picked on plantations around the world, then the beans are roasted to order at 350° to 500° in one of Duncan’s two roasters—either the oven roaster or the air roaster, which



tosses the beans in a convection oven-like setting—depending on the type of bean. If flavors have been specified, then the beans are carefully enhanced with a special Duncan Coffee Company-designed piece of equipment.

As I gently insert my hand into a plastic bucket of warm, freshly roasted beans their full, rich aroma reaches my nose. “Coffee beans,” Duncan IV explains to me, “begin to lose their freshness after they are roasted.” So Duncan’s beans are roasted to order and out the door. Most restaurants order twice a week and if they order before noon they receive their fresh roasted coffee that day. Nothing shipped is 2 to 3 days post roast.

In addition to Duncan IV, Duncan Coffee Company is comprised of Chief Operating Officer Joseph Arnold who runs the day to day business operations of the company and former

Maryland Club salesperson Ken Harrison. Duncan himself serves as chief roaster (and sales person), developing special, personalized blends for restaurants like Café Annie and La Mora in Houston. He says a lot of times, the chefs like to come over and get involved in the roasting process. One notable amateur roaster is not a chef, but former President George Herbert Walker Bush. Duncan provides the coffee for his Houston office as well as provided the coffee for President George W. Bush’s campaign and inauguration.

In Houston, Duncan coffee can be purchased at Bering’s, some Fiestas and Rice Epicurean Markets. It retails for \$8 to \$10 a pound. Outside of Houston, Duncan Coffee Company operates the coffee bars at Texas A&M University, sells his coffee at Bering’s in San Antonio and you can sip his coffee at Café Express in Dallas.

Duncan Coffee Company also operates three coffee bars in Houston which serve as market research facilities more than anything else. Says Duncan, “We needed to understand how coffee is served.” One can purchase a cup at the bars in Chase Tower downtown, Williams Tower in the Galleria area and the Bright & Early Coffee Shop, located on Washington and Shepherd, a joint venture between Café Annie executive chef Ben Berryhill and Duncan Coffee Company.

Duncan’s goal is to grow the company to \$2 to \$3 million in sales per year. Duncan has had several offers to buy and expand his business, but is reluctant to expand because he fears the quality of his coffee will diminish. He enjoys focusing on the Houston market where he has complete control over the quality of his product. After five years in business, Duncan reflects, “It has been an interesting ride. It’s ten times better than I expected it to be. But nothing is as good as someone saying ‘Now *that’s* a good cup of coffee.’”