



Smell the coffee

Blind businessman knows when the roast is just right

By Alicia Wallace, Camera Business Writer

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Gerry Leary slowly flipped the switch on the coffee roaster, and the small machine started to hum. Leary, founder of The Unseen Bean, a Boulder-based coffee roasting company, slid his hands along the counter to a bag of beans from Malawi and Zambia. Unroasted, the beans smelled sharp and bitter. That smell changed dramatically after the green beans were poured into the 375-degree barrel of the roaster.

As they rolled in the cage, the rattling grew quieter and the crackling of the expanding beans became more frequent. The second wave of crackling was higher in pitch - the bulging beans released less moisture and instead produced a husky aroma that filled the surrounding air. The beans turned dark in color, a sign to most roasters that the desired product was achieved. But to Leary, who is blind, the color is absolute. From the sounds, smells and timing, he knows when his house blend has been roasted to perfection. However, Leary said it is something other than blind-roasted coffee that sets him apart from the competition.

"I cater more to the individual than the businesses or coffeehouses do," he said. "I roast about four to five different batches and make them try a little of each to find out what they do like. I note the temperature, the time it takes and the type of beans so I can do the same the next time when they want more."

A slight change in temperature or length of the roast can mean a big world of difference to two customers, he said. To Leary, coffee roasting is an art form.

"I might not be able to tell what color it is," he said, "but I just have to pay a little more attention to the smell, the sounds and the taste." It was sound that initially intrigued Leary to take the path of roasting. "Back in the early '90s, I was in San Francisco at a restaurant with a friend and I heard a noise that sounded like a rock polisher," he said. "I was really curious and they proceeded to take me

through a roast. After tasting it, I thought, 'Wow, this is much better than what I usually find for coffee.'"

Leary's fascination spurred him to find a training job as a roaster. However, some viewed his vision impairment as an obstacle that couldn't be overcome. Despite the challenges, Leary kept searching until he found training.

"He's always got such an upbeat attitude and people tell him 'no' all the time and it doesn't stop him," said Barbara Spohn-Lillo, owner of Prosthetic Illusions, the company that made Leary's two artificial eyes. "I just like the fact that he kind of gets rid of the stereotypes of blind people. He can do stuff that people tell him that he can't do." At the end of January, Leary was finishing at the San Francisco Coffee Training Institute. He bought a couple of 100-pound burlap bags of beans and purchased roasting equipment. One of his first tasks was to specialize his roaster. He couldn't read the thermometer settings, so he set up a talking thermometer and timer. The roaster is out in his shed, so if business expands and he buys a larger roaster, he said he'll have to set up shop in his garage and use the shed to store beans.

Although business has been a little slow starting out, through word-of-mouth Leary has gained about 25 customers. On Leary's table sat a thank-you note from Carl Ruby: "Thank you for your

gift of excellent-tasting coffee," the card read. "A better cup I have not had in many a month, so wonderful in the mouth, so smooth after the swallow." The two met when Leary was roasting coffee at a mutual friend's wedding anniversary.

"I was most fascinated with his roasting," said Ruby, who lives in Westminster. "He has a good ear and a good nose and it seems to get the job done. He's got it down." Ruby said he also was impressed with The Unseen Bean's logo that is on each quarter-pound bag of beans. The black-and-white label, which is a portrait of Leary's guide dog, Midnight, is simple. Above the picture, written in Braille, is the type of roast. "It's something that's different," Leary said. "It fits well with The Unseen Bean."

The logo with Midnight also is on the front page of Leary's Web site. He said he hopes to gain further business after he gets theunseenbean.com up and running.

Although he has stopped by a few coffee shops and ice cream parlors looking

for commercial contracts, he said he doesn't want to lose the personal aspect of his business.

"I want to be able to also help people educate themselves," he said. "This way, whether the roast is darker or lighter, they'll know what they really like."

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