

Perri Gallatin works the roaster—producing approximately 900 pounds of coffee daily—all by hand.

HOUSTON'S OTHER

BlackGold

For Lola Savannah Coffee Company,
the future is bright with a mild acidity.

BY SANDRA COOK

THE ENERGY INDUSTRY MAY keep the world's machines in motion, but coffee fuels many of us mere mortals. While the coffee industry has been brewing in Houston for more than 60 years, the city's coffee-profile got a huge kick in 2003, when the Port of Houston became one of only four coffee exchange ports in the nation. This means green coffee (unroasted beans), which is bought and sold on the New York Board of Trade, can be stored and distributed in Houston. World-wide, coffee beans are the top export for dozens of countries. And, among natural commodities, the monetary value of coffee beans is surpassed only by oil.

Houstonian Duke Furrh got into the coffee business because of his undeniably robust love of coffee. Spend a few minutes talking beans with him and you'll see he's not just a fan of the beverage; he's something of a coffee ambassador. As a scout for his company, Lola Savannah Coffee Company, Furrh pursues and procures high-quality coffee beans from the most sought-after coffee-producing regions of the world. Furrh frequently surveys and samples coffee crops across the bean belt – the swath of the globe between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

If you've never heard of Lola Savannah it's because Furrh and his partner Michael Spencer spend more time focusing on roasting than boasting. You'll find the two dressed in their company shirts and cargo shorts drinking and/or tasting their coffees most weekdays with their clients or at their downtown roasting facility, where small batches of coffee beans – just 30 pounds at a time – are roasted by hand daily.

The unpretentious pair is soft-spoken, but sentimental, about their world headquarters on the north side of downtown Houston. "It's a great old brick and mortar building," says Furrh. The rock-solid, red brick building was built by Jesse Jones as a stationary

warehouse in 1925 at the corner of Commerce and Jackson. This especially sturdy structure was designed to support a mountain of paper, so it's well-suited for stacking the standard 132- to 152-pound bags of coffee beans Lola Savannah imports.

Being centrally located within the city is advantageous for routing their deliveries all over the Houston area and the eastern half of Texas. Why is that so important?



Duke Furrh (left) and Michael Spencer take the business of coffee very seriously but keep their humorous attitudes.


Furrh's passion is seeking out the **best beans** from almost every coffee-producing region of the world.

Coffee roasted locally yields the best-quality cup you can get, because freshness and flavor begin to diminish immediately after roasting. Coffee shipped from elsewhere has been bagged for days, weeks or longer. Local coffee is a greener choice as well, since it is only transported a few miles rather than a few time zones.

The company, which specializes in custom small-batch roasting and coffee imports, began in 1995. Furrh got involved with Lola Savannah in 1997 and eventually purchased the company, while Spencer came on board in 2002. Back then, the company's client base was mostly made up of restaurants, so the determined duo set about building the wholesale side of the business. After selling their coffees to clients such as Bering's Hardware, major grocery stores became part of the Lola family.

Furrh's passion is seeking out the best beans from almost every coffee-producing region of the world – no continent or island is beyond his scope. Business partner Michael Spencer focuses on customer service. "I like selling coffee, because people usually know they want to buy it," Spencer laughs. "It's not like selling life insurance or investment services," Furrh adds with a grin.

The two take pride in the products they offer and the service they provide to their clients. And they must be doing something right, because Lola Savannah has experienced steady growth in recent years, picking up new customers almost completely by word of mouth.

Today, H-E-B and Central Market make up Lola Savannah's biggest client. The Texas grocer and gourmet foods retailer regularly offers about 15 varieties of Lola Savannah coffees. The company also distributes their coffees to select Houston-area Kroger and Fiesta stores and Fresh Plus stores in the Austin area. Numerous varieties, such as Nicaraguan Matagalpa and Tanzanian Peaberry, are available at those select store locations. You may have tried Lola Savannah coffees at Houston restaurants, such as Vic & Anthony's, Brenner's Steakhouse on the Bayou, Star Pizza, Irma's, Out to Lunch, Dharma Cafe, Ziggy's Healthy Grill and Epicure Bakery. 

BREW YOUR BEST

START WITH LOCALLY roasted beans.

DON'T FREEZE OR REFRIGERATE COFFEE: Moisture and airflow will rob your beans of flavor.

STORE IN AIR-TIGHT CONTAINER: You live in Houston; see above.

USE UP YOUR COFFEE BEANS within 3 to 4 weeks for best flavor and aroma.

GRIND YOUR BEANS immediately before brewing.

USE FILTERED WATER: Coffee is 98 percent water, so the cleaner the better.

BREW IN PROPER PROPORTIONS: 2 tablespoons of ground coffee to ¾ cup water.

