

STEADY ROASTER

Love affair with a coffee bean

By Kaitlin Ugolik
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It's hard to hear Stephen Cox speak over the sound of beans being scooped and fed through the roaster in the aromatic back room of his downtown Burlington coffee business.

He reaches up with a tub of green Sumatra coffee beans and pours them into the drum of the huge machine. There they will circulate for about 12 minutes as the heat from a natural gas burner dries them out and turns them brown.

"That surprises everybody," Cox said of the beans' pre-roast color.

He didn't plan on being a full-time coffee roaster when he started experimenting in the back yard of his home in Elon 15 years ago. He started with a popcorn air popper, which roasts the beans on a bed of hot air.

What began as a hobby quickly became an obsession, and eventually a career.

In 2000 he moved his roasting business from the industrial area around Webb Avenue to Spring Street in downtown Burlington and opened Triad Specialty Roasters with The Roaster's Café inside.



Before that, his business had been strictly wholesale since its beginning in 1997, roasting for local gourmet shops that sold whole bean coffee. Cox needed more room, and wanted to test his products out on more customers, but he also noticed a lack of good coffee in the area. People were driving to other cities to buy coffee.

Though Triad Specialty Roasters has become a café where meals are served along with coffee, the wholesale business is what keeps the money and passion flowing. More than competition with bigger franchises or declining customer base, Cox said the biggest threat to businesses like his own is that America is "losing its flavor."

His café is decorated generously with coffee memorabilia from any number of places and times. Wood paneling and glass-topped tables create a non-commercial environment. On the wall in the roasting room is a bumper sticker that reads, "Independents do it without chains. Enjoy your locally-owned coffeehouse."

"I tried to do everything I could to keep this from being a corporate atmosphere," Cox said.

David Noer, professor of business administration at Elon University, said that the effort to be non-commercial is common for many small business owners who want to differentiate themselves from the "big boxes," or large chains and franchises, with which they compete.

He said he doesn't have a lot of couches and easy chairs in his café because that doesn't appeal to his customer base. Most of Cox's customers are people who work downtown, though he said he used to get more from Elon and the western part of Burlington before the influx of Starbucks stores.

"This business is a niche market and a specialty business. Everybody will come in and buy a cup of coffee, but people who are used to drinking specialty coffee or espresso drinks are usually a little more affluent. We all know that in Burlington, that's the west."

Starbucks might hurt his business more if it were right across the street, but Cox said he wouldn't associate the projected \$80,000 per year salary that the average Starbucks customer makes with his business. He said that LabCorp has the biggest impact on his customer base.

One of a handful of coffee shops in Burlington, Triad Specialty Roasters is the first stop in the morning for many LabCorp employees who work downtown. When LabCorp makes changes, it trickles down.

"If they have a layoff, I notice. If they transfer people, I notice because they're my customers. They'll transfer them to the other side of town and I'll lose 20 to 30 customers in one day."

Business is steady for Roasters though, because the wholesale part of the business never sways.

Cox ships 5-pound bags of coffee almost every day, Monday through Thursday, to places all over North Carolina and Virginia, but his biggest customer is Fortuna Enterprises LLC in Greensboro, a distributor of Triad Specialty Roasters coffee who helps entrepreneurs set up their own coffee shops.

"Coffee shops should be just like the local bar: people come in every day and know people, the baristas are the bartenders — they know everybody's name and what they're going to drink before they say it. (Customers) come in amazingly at the same times every day. You can almost set your watch by them."

John Maynard, 43, is a regular. The man Roasters employees call "Big John" comes in every day at the same time, between 8 and 9 a.m., for coffee and conversation.

"These are the greatest people in the world," he said of the Roasters employees after introducing some colleagues to Jesy, who took their orders. "It's way out of the way, but it's good coffee and a group of regular folks I like to sit and visit with."

Kaitlin Ugolik is a student at Elon University.