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There's an awful lot of coffee ... and a lot of it isn't so hot
City saves 3 cents a pot buying out-of-state brew instead of Lansing's
Paramount; drinkers can't tell difference

By DANIEL STURM

What would the world be like without coffee? This question came to mind when I read that City Hall spent \$20,000 each year on this caffeinated drink. Without tasting those black beans in the morning, would city employees be able to wake up? Would they finally switch to drinking black tea? I thought of Gustav III, the 18th century King of Sweden who believed coffee was poisonous. During his regency he enforced what he believed to be a death penalty forcing convicted murderers to drink one cup of coffee a day until it eventually destroyed their health. King Gustav decided to perform an experiment, forcing a second murderer to drink a cup of tea each day – thus proving, he thought, that coffee was poisonous. Unfortunately the tea drinker died first.

There's no doubt about that coffee can be an engine strong enough to run an entire system, whether of an individual or collective. Take the city's decision to buy coffee out-of-state: In March 2001 Mayor David Hollister signed the Finance Department's recommendation to buy most of the city's coffee from Interstate Gourmet Coffee Roasters in South Easton, Mass. Since then, many city employees are no longer sipping a bottomless cup of homebrew java, roasted by Paramount, on Larch Street across from Oldsmobile Park, but one of "Boston's Best." Why? It's "because of a better price," a Purchasing Department employee said. Via the Freedom of Information Act, City Pulse found out that the difference is a mere 3 cents per package. Boston's Best costs 40 cents for 1.3 ounces, whereas Paramount offered the city a rate of 43¢ per package. Presuming an annual budget of \$20,000 City Hall will save \$1,500 per year by purchasing its coffee in Massachusetts.

For this money it seems hard to understand why City Hall would ignore a local coffee roaster, which has been in business since 1935. A city

ordinance states a “preference for local bidders” if offers are equal, and this has become the mantra of politicians wishing to support regional businesses. When I asked city officials why they worked to attract local businesses, but disfavored those already in Lansing, Senior Buyer Stephanie Boggs said the decision to switch to Boston’s Best wasn’t based only on better pricing, but also on a better taste.

This brought City Pulse to the idea of hosting a blind coffee taste test. Do beans from Boston really taste better than those roasted in Lansing? That would be the question. To my surprise it wasn’t easy to find test judges. City of Lansing employees kindly declined, the whole thing having supposedly become too political after City Pulse reported that the city bought twice as much Boston’s Best as Paramount in the last fiscal year, whereas in the previous two years it bought virtually all its coffee from Paramount. Looking for community leaders to participate, I asked MSU Trustee Dorothy Gonzales and community gay activist Bob Egan, but both admitted to being tea drinkers. In the end our six committed judges were: Internet analyst Bonnie Bucqueroux, MSU hospitality professor Jeff Elsworth, chemistry doctoral student Fadi Asfour, City Pulse publisher Berl Schwartz, distribution manager Paul Shore and arts editor Elaine Yaw. The local coffee house king Bob Fish, co-founder of Beaner’s, served as the master of ceremonies.

“There’s never a right or wrong,” Fish advised, “because we’re all different in our makeup.” Fish had prepared five sorts of office coffee, freshly brewed in air pots never before used. Boston’s Best and Paramount were among the sorts. Judges were to go through a procedure of five testing rounds, and to evaluate the different java sorts marked as A, B, C, D and E on a sheet of paper.

Above: This wheel helped the taste testers decide how the coffee tasted to them – fruity, nutty, earthy, acidic. Bob Fish, right, introduced everybody to the technique of coffee tasting, which included judging aroma, body, flavor, and initial and finish taste. There is no right or wrong, he said, because all coffee drinkers aren’t the same.

Fish introduced everybody to the technique of coffee tasting, which included judging aroma, body, flavor, and initial and finish taste. He stressed the importance of measuring identical weights of coffee in order to get comparable test results (we used 1.55 ounces per pot, the amount typically used in office coffee pots and roughly one ounce less than the dose for premium coffee sorts). Impressed enough, hospitality professor Jeff Elsworth asked Bob Fish: “Would you like to give a lecture in my beverage class?” The last time, this author experienced such a grand event was at a wine-testing ceremony along the French Loire River. Two vineyard owners had rosy cheeks and were acting funny, due to the red wine they’d sipped all day. That would be no danger here, but I did worry

a little about caffeine shock.

“When you sip the coffee you need to first suck it into your lip, then you have to soak it in, let it go to the back of your mouth, and let it sit there for a while,” Fish explained. After a meditative pause during which most judges practiced the suggested techniques, Bonnie Bucqueroux replied, “I guess I’ll slurp it down.”

Unfortunately, the judges were receiving just a short crash course, Fish said. He presented a “flavor wheel” to advise them in grading the coffee sorts. Fish explained some of the possible descriptions, which were similar to those in wine tasting – fruity, nutty, earthy, winy, acidic, tannin, dark and light. On the flavor wheel, coffee could even be described to taste like “kerosene,” because it had sat next to a diesel engine while being shipped to the vendor. Fish pointed out that there could be no absolute objectivity, as judges were influenced by variables such as that “we’ve smelled coffee brewing for 20 minutes” and the test room itself. In an industrial setting, he said, “we test coffee in a white room totally free of any chemicals.”

After an hour of sipping and grading, judges turned in their grades. Chemistry doctoral student Fadi Asfour wanted to go through another three rounds (natural sciences require an experiment to be repeated at least three times). Perhaps this might not have been a bad idea, considering that the results didn’t show significant differences between the five competing coffee sorts. “We have five different judges and five different opinions — so what is good coffee?” Fish summarized the ambiguous picture: Mocha Java, the world’s oldest coffee ground, received 96 out of 150 possible points, followed by the mainstream Java Maxwell House (90). Boston’s Best, Paramount and Beaner’s were tied with 86 points each. Aroma was the only category where differences varied significantly. Here Mocha scored best again with 22 out of 30 possible points, followed by Paramount (19), Maxwell House and Beaner’s Best (both 17), and Boston’s Best (9).

This surprising result led to an inspiring debate about intercultural coffee drinking habits. How is it possible to dislike the aroma of coffee (smell), but at the same time praise its flavor (taste)? Bucqueroux presented a plausible solution of this supposed paradox. “A coffee might taste awkward and unbalanced, but you could still like it!”

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