



Behind the Beans

If Danny O'Neill had his way, coffee would be the national drink. Again.

words KIMBERLY WINTER STERN | photos PAUL VERSLUIS

Danny O'Neill savors his eighth espresso of the day on this rainy February Friday afternoon. His towering six-foot, eight-inch frame makes the cup he's holding look positively Lilliputian. Sitting on a chair in the coffee laboratory of The Roasterie's® headquarters off Southwest Blvd. in Kansas City, watching his baristas scurry in and out with demitasse cups brimming with perfectly pulled shots of dark and aromatic liquid, O'Neill is in his element.

You're offered a cup—"I'll take what Danny's drinking"—and upon the first tentative sip of the thick brew, you instantly feel your heart beat faster. Even before that caffeine-injected pulsing sensation washes over your body, it's the coffee's taste you notice.

Air-roasted, buttery-sweet, soft and mellow, full-bodied. O'Neill is an obliging host and coaches you along the notes, tones and mysteries that are folded into the superior Super Tuscan Espresso you're contemplating. It's a moment steeped in reverence, in hushed meditation over a brand that O'Neill has painstakingly built, one bean at a time, starting in his Brookside basement in 1993.

O'Neill is particularly proud of this blend—but only because it's the Roasterie espresso that's being served at the moment. It's difficult for this driven entrepreneur to choose his preferred coffee, espresso or tea; that would be like asking O'Neill to pick his favorite child—Terry or Sophie.

More about Daddy O'Neill later. Right now the conversation is full-octane Coffee Talk with Kansas City's self-professed Bean Baron.

HISTORY LESSON

Back in the late 1700s, during a tumultuous time in American history, coffee was named the national drink by the Continental Congress. The Merchant's Coffee House in Philadelphia hosted the first public reading and a New York City coffee house welcomed General George Washing-

ton prior to his inauguration. Coffee's rich history in the United States isn't lost on O'Neill, an Iowa farm boy.

If he had his way, coffee would be the national drink. Again. Not for political reasons, mind you—but because, as O'Neill says in his Iowegian drawl, "It's so darned good."

O'Neill's coffee roots can be traced back to his days as a foreign exchange student in Costa Rica. It's a story of legend now in these parts—a lanky, Midwestern kid falls in love with an exotic bean thousands of miles from home. Years later, that romantic encounter with coffee plucked from trees on lush South American hill-sides would launch a coffee revolution in O'Neill's adult home-of-choice, Kansas City. O'Neill still visits his foreign exchange family on the many bean-hunting expeditions he conducts to find the best coffee grown by specialty farmers—and he purchases every bean for a fair price.

For O'Neill, being in business isn't just about the product—it's also about the people.

SWEATING THE DETAILS

"Owning a business—whether it's coffee, an auto dealership or a boutique—is hard work," says O'Neill. "You sweat the details, every last one of them. I make sure that my commitment to quality and freshness is communicated to The Roasterie's customers."

According to O'Neill, there's no secret to success.

"I kept looking for it at the beginning of owning my business and then I realized, this *is* the secret," he says. "The hard work and connecting with people."

O'Neill is intimately involved with entrepreneurial think tank HEMP (Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentoring Program) and helps budding business owners understand the art of doing business.

"It's important to me to share what I've learned along the way, both mistakes and successes," says O'Neill, who consults with

the best of the best in KC's high-profile entrepreneurial community.

The Roasterie—whose logo, a now-familiar airplane and tagline, "Live life on the rim" describes O'Neill to a tee—is served in some of Kansas City's and Johnson County's best-known restaurants like The American, La Bodega, Trezo Vino and Nick and Jake's. It's sold in grocery stores across the metro and at Costco.

"I MAKE SURE
THAT MY
COMMITMENT TO
QUALITY AND
FRESHNESS IS
COMMUNICATED
TO THE
ROASTERIE'S
CUSTOMERS."

Businesses, charities and even individuals work with O'Neill's employees at The Roasterie to concoct their own blend. Chances are if you're a regular on the prolific nonprofit circuit in town, you've toted home the shiny 1.75-ounce bags labeled with an organization's name—O'Neill helps out countless events. The Roasterie just may be the most giving cup of coffee around—O'Neill donates thousands of pounds and gallons annually. He also hosts fundraisers at The Roasterie's plant for institutions like KCPT and organizations like Cabot Westside Health Center.

Not because he has to shell out beans for free—O'Neill admits the word "no" is in

SPOTLIGHT: DANNY O'NEILL & THE ROASTERIE

his vocabulary. He supports the community and its efforts because he wants to.

"It makes us part of the community that supports us," he says.

The Roasterie's collection of air-roasted coffee blends includes reserve, origin, flavored, organic and dark. Signature java blends that emerge after intense cupping sessions are available, too—among them KC's chocolate king, Christopher Elbow, and Plaza sidewalk bistro favorite Classic Cup.

If coffee could be defined as couture, The Roasterie would be the House of Chanel.

BEANMEISTERS

O'Neill's employee roster reads a bit like a Lewis Carroll novel on caffeine. There's Storm'n Norman Killmon, Bean Browner—The Roasterie's master roaster since March 6, 1994. Killmon's nose and palate have been in the coffee trenches for more than 40 years—a track record that's important to O'Neill.

"We have some good ones," he says of his 53-strong team of employees. "Each of us is fine alone, but it's immensely rewarding and fun when working together."

Paul Massard is O'Neill's right-hand Bean Hunter. Born in Colombia—sacred coffee country—Massard grew up in Naples, Fla., interned for First Colony Coffee and Tea in Norfolk, Va., and eventually moved to KC. He accompanies O'Neill on jaunts to coffee plantations across the globe, learning from the Bean Baron what to search for in the green cherries that are air roasted at The Roasterie's state-of-the-art plant and packaged for sale.

IF COFFEE COULD BE DEFINED AS COUTURE, THE ROASTERIE WOULD BE THE HOUSE OF CHANEL.

"Immersion is the best way to learn this business," says O'Neill. "It's like learning a language—it's best to practice, practice, practice. I can teach Paul in 10 days on a trip what it might take two years or more to understand when not in the field."

Massard's first venture into coffee bean hunting was to Panama—a double-duty mission. Besides learning the art of the coffee bean, Massard also got to interact with people firsthand, one of O'Neill's solemn requirements.

"It's important for us to see how we do business with our growers," says O'Neill. "It's a partnership with total respect."

Carla O'Neill is The Roasterie's only Dream Bean—she's the Bean Baron's wife. The exotic Lebanese beauty is general manager of the two Roasterie Cafés, ensuring that customers are happy and informed.

Jumping Bean, Blender Bean, Ground Bean, Dollar Bean and Emily Farris, or Chatty Bean—the company's communications director—and other beans round out the Roasterie team.



"People make the brand," says O'Neill, adding that educating customers on the finer points of coffee is another part of The Roasterie's service to the community. "We all love what we do."

It's coffee culture, at its air-roasted best.

CAFÉ SOCIETY

O'Neill opened his first coffeehouse in October 2005—within a whirlwind 10-day period he and Carla had their first child, bought a new factory and launched the storefront. The neighborhood and other coffee connoisseurs that ventured from across State Line to buy a cup immediately embraced the Roasterie Café.

O'Neill realized his vision of bringing people together over conversation and a good cup of joe and, because the shop is located mere blocks from his home, he often revels in joining his customers for a morning cup or an afternoon break. Even if you don't know it's O'Neill perched on a bar-height chair by the ordering line, you know the guy with the smile and espresso is having a rollicking good time.

The second Roasterie Café opened last November in the trendy One Nineteen collection of shops and restaurants in Leawood. The bright, spacious coffeehouse is full from open to close with people networking, chatting, clicking away on MacBooks and listening to iPods—and drinking all variations of Roasterie coffee. O'Neill sometimes takes meetings at the south location, and proudly surveys the people enjoying the heart of his passion—ambiance and coffee.

O'Neill is a sucker for a child—just ask him about the apples of his eye, Terry and Sophie. He regularly places donation boxes in the Roasterie Cafés for children-related charities such as Operation Breakthrough and relies on the kindness of his customers to fill up those bins with toys, books and clothing.

FAMILY AFFAIR

O'Neill's second title, after Bean Baron, would have to be Daddy Bean. Fatherhood is a responsibility he cherishes, and anyone who knows O'Neill knows his kids. Terry, O'Neill's and Carla's son, is named after O'Neill's late father, a tough-on-the-outside with a soft center Iowa farmer. Terry, who is as spunky as kindergartners come, travels the world with his parents and is The Roasterie's unofficial ambassador. Three-year-old Sophie is the charmer, endlessly entertaining the family on weekend trips to their farm outside KC.

Contrary to O'Neill's public persona, he would much rather stay in on Friday and Saturday nights, playing videos and reading books with the kids, eating one of Carla's Mediterranean meals and soaking up family life.

And within reach would be that last cup of Roasterie espresso for the day.

You can almost hear O'Neill's contented sigh. ❖

For more information on The Roasterie, its products and The Roasterie Cafés or to schedule a plant tour, visit www.theroasterie.com.