

Brewing Up Business

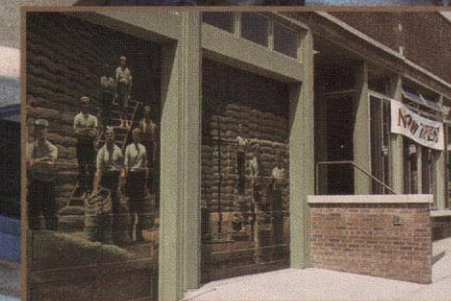
BY MARCIA DROUIN-SMITH



Far left, a mural on the outside of the building welcomes you to Alterra Coffee Roasters on Milwaukee's East Side. Left, the inviting roasting cafe previously housed a garage and automobile dealership. Above, Scott Manning, owner of Cream City Coffee, in Cedarburg, purchases his coffee from Alterra, who helped him get started. Below, one of Alterra's roasting machines. Photos By Lee Wickersheimer.

nobody that does display roasting in an open cafe on this big of a scale. It's a great way to educate people about our business." (They will be offering tours to groups and schools in the near future, phone 414/273-3753.)

Miller and Ward Fowler delight in the building's theatrical presentation. The outside remains much the same as it once was, with the garage loading ramp used as an alternative entrance. According to Miller, the building will soon be crowned with an artistic metal sculpted sign depicting people enjoying coffee in various ways. The sign ties in with the visual theme the Alterra partners have maintained since the beginning—from their stationery to their aesthetic coffee bags. Local artist



There are some universally pleasant aromas that we all know and welcome: golden loaves of bread baking in the oven; a warm, refreshing spring rain; and the tantalizing fragrance of rich coffee brewing.

EVEN IF YOU AREN'T an avid coffee fan it's hard not to enjoy sitting and relaxing in the ambiance of a friendly coffee house. Why? Maybe because smelling and tasting a good cup of coffee is such a simple pleasure in a very techno-complex world.

It was that simple pleasure that brought Paul Miller and brothers Ward and Lincoln Fowler together to form Alterra Coffee Roasters—Milwaukee's own answer to Seattle and Starbucks Coffee. The partners, all in their 30s, met while looking for inexpensive warehouse space to house their other retail

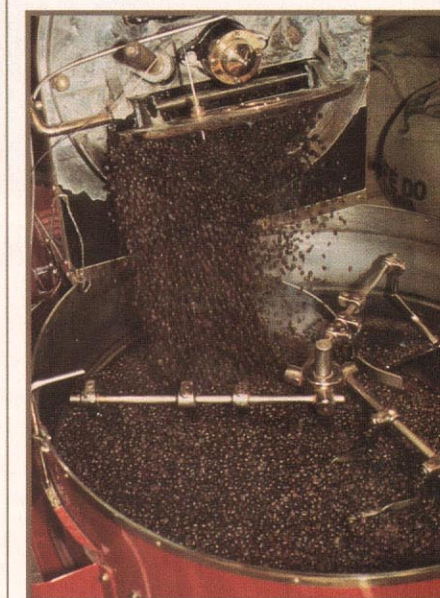
businesses. They soon realized they all had an appreciation for a great cup of coffee. It wasn't long before they began brewing up ideas to roast their own beans and become a wholesaler to regional businesses.

Today, after four years in the business, Alterra has branched out to retail their venture with grand, artistic flair. The scent of fresh roasting coffee beans rolls down Prospect Avenue, just south of North Avenue, where Alterra's display roasting cafe opened in mid-August. The former 14,000 square foot Chevrolet garage and Studebaker dealer

is now recycled into a renovated space that serves as a cafe and roasting warehouse.

Miller equates the display roasting concept with a micro brewery—"but here you can see more of the process from delivery to packaging," he said. "When you come here, you are coming to a working facility."

The cafe is set in the front of the building where stacks of 150 pound bags of coffee beans separate customers from the roasting, packaging and delivery portion of the facility. The set-up is a unique one, Miller explained, "there's



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ALTERRA COFFEE

Joe Niedzialkowski creates the mood and tone with his rich, coffee colored drawings that evoke a 1930s working class feel. Miller said the look has a romanticized feel, but was chosen as a theme "out of our respect for work." It "reinforces the idea that we are a working roaster," he added.

Inside, six mahogany tables with cafe chairs and 10 stools, which line a bar along a wall of eight-foot high windows, beckon visitors to sit a spell. The cafe features bagels and bakery, smoothies, juices and, of course, the coffees of the day. You won't find a list of pre-flavored coffees. Alterra made its reputation on straight varietal brews and they've kept it that way. Natural flavorings are offered, however, and customers may choose from a wide variety. Caramel Royale is one of their most popular coffee flavored drinks.

A stroll over to the bean counter allows customers buying bulk coffee to view and smell sample trays. The trays feature a large selection of beans before and after roasting, which, according to Miller all "adds to the education process." Customers ordering bags of beans "to go" will be treated to freshness beyond compare. A ceiling pulley system is being put in place so that orders can be sent to the back and packaged right from the roasters. More than 60 coffees and blends are available from beans that come from every corner of the globe.

The cafe is a new extension of the growing Alterra business itself. Having just installed a second roaster, Alterra now has the capacity to roast up to 20,000 pounds of beans a month (that translates to over a half million cups of coffee). The partners supply roasted beans to restaurants and coffee houses throughout Wisconsin in addition to selling and servicing equipment and training people to make the perfect cup of espresso.

Alterra offers its wholesale customers coffees and blends from 30 different origins such as Guatemala, Africa, Costa Rica and New Guinea. Coffee is really a global business, according to Miller. He noted that next to oil, coffee is the second most traded commodity in the world. "It's a very fascinating world and we try to convey some of that."

The partners are constantly sampling

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coffee, it's a never ending selection process. Alterra's bean suppliers change as often as the weather or the season. Many variables can affect a coffee bean, not the least of which is the grower himself. "It all comes down to the care the farmer takes with his land and his beans," explained Miller. The beans reflect the soil environment from which they come. Miller said African coffee is a rich and very dense bean—lovers of very strong coffee prefer it. The most popular Alterra coffee, however, is their signature Guatemalan blend, which is milder than the African brew.

Quality control and freshness are two aspects of Alterra that keep them growing. Ward takes pride in the service and innovation they offer the cafes and restaurants that serve their coffees.

"Some of what makes us stand out from other people who are roasting coffee is the research we've done into the brewing science," said Ward. "We've really looked at it closely and have made modifications to the brewing equipment itself. Flavor is not by chance, we have spent a lot of time and effort forcing the equipment to do what we want it to."

Ward himself has reinvented the metal filter basket, changing its geometry and altering the way the water flows through it to enhance flavor. He explained there are three stages of control which they continually refine to enhance quality: sourcing, roasting and brewing. And as for freshness, "We don't store any coffee at the end of the week—we're fanatical about freshness."

Alterra offers a lot of perks for first time coffeehouse owners.

Scott Manning, owner of Cream City Coffee, in downtown Cedarburg (W62 N605 Washington Avenue), opened his shop in November of 1996. His initial plan after leaving the advertising and promotion business was to open a franchise coffee shop where for \$25,000 they would set him up in business. One meeting with Miller and the Fowler brothers changed his mind completely.

"I was very impressed with Alterra," noted Manning. After meeting with them, "I was convinced I could go it along and not do a franchise."

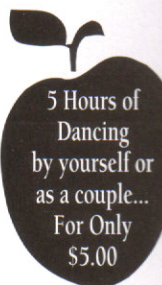
Manning explained that Alterra offered training, start-up help, next day service, equipment and equipment

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