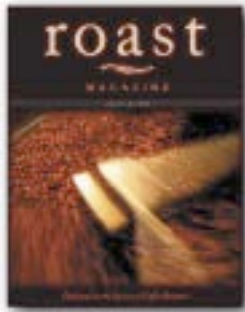


## ARTICLE REPRINT



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**TITLE** Roaster Profile: Little River Roasting Company

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**MOST SPECIALTY COFFEE ROASTERS** offer a variety of familiar roast levels: American, French and Italian to name a few. But only one offers the light-light roast known as the Tuxedo roast.

Designed to suit the unusual tastes of the coffee-drinking public in Tuxedo, N.C., this roast is the custom-creation of Gervais Hollowell of the Little River Roasting Company. “The people of Tuxedo couldn’t drink the coffee [I was roasting],” Hollowell says. “No matter which coffee or blend I came up with, I always heard the same complaint; ‘This stuff is too strong!’”

Although primarily a wholesale roaster, informal sales to local people who stopped by the roastery gave Hollowell a chance to see firsthand the reaction to his coffees. Hollowell says he’d watch, disheartened, while customers poured themselves half a cup of his coffee and filled the rest with water. “Specialty coffee is new here, so I had to find something that would introduce the local market to the world of great coffee. That’s how the Tuxedo Roast came about. I took our wonderful Cameroon Boyo to a light roast, and the people loved it.”

After opening in Tuxedo in 2000, Little River moved the main roasting operation to nearby Spartanburg, S.C., in 2001. Many darker roast levels have been added to the lineup, but the Tuxedo roast continues to be one of Little River’s best-sellers, not only in Tuxedo, but throughout the Carolinas.

The Tuxedo roast illustrates an important lesson for small roasting companies: they must present products that differentiate them from general marketplace. For Little River, this also means roasting coffee from the West African nation of Cameroon.

The Boyo area in the North and West provinces of Cameroon spans more than 1,800 meters, and the small, one-to-two hectare farms are planted with the Blue Mountain varietal. “It is a rich, earthy, full-bodied coffee that lingers on the tongue. This and its fine acidity make for a well-rounded cup,” says Hollowell. “And not only are they excellent coffees, they are organic and shade-grown. We use these coffees in our blends and feature them by themselves in lighter (Tuxedo) and darker roasts.” Little River pays above market prices to support ongoing quality initiatives.



Altering roast styles to adapt to local tastes demonstrates that flexibility often holds the key to success for a small specialty coffee roaster. A family-run operation that roasted just over 40,000 pounds last year, Little River is no exception. In early 2002, local inns, restaurants and coffee shops bought most of Little River’s weekly 300-pound run.

But later that year, through a friend’s helpful introduction, Hollowell landed a contract with a major retail consumer goods chain, which placed an order for national distribution. The initial order was for 3,000 pounds in 12-ounce bags, and a follow-up order was for 24,000 pounds in one-pound bags. While this was great news for sales, it put a strain on resources, so

the roastery turned to family members and the community for help. Hollowell roasted the coffee, and then it was poured into homemade hoppers that were mounted to a pair of grocery store grinders run by Hollowell’s wife Laura. The Hollowell’s daughters, Leland and Kathleen, and many of their friends, hand-sealed the bags and applied the labels. It took six weeks to fill the initial order.

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Additional orders followed, and Little River was able to slowly upgrade its equipment. The company's original 25-pound Diedrich roaster was augmented with a 100-pound model. To further increase capacity through the use of pre-printed bags, a matrix bagging machine was added. Help also came in the form of three new employees, and the most recent order was filled in one very busy week.

Although selling unique products and taking creative approaches to problem-solving are an important part of Little Rivers' success, it is the company's roots in the communities of the Western Carolinas that sustain it. The Hollowells have recently turned part of their roasting facility into retail space and have begun to sell beans directly to consumers in Spartanburg.

Whether it's introducing people in the Southeast to new roast styles or to coffees from exotic places, Little River continues to do its part to increase specialty coffee awareness and appreciation.

