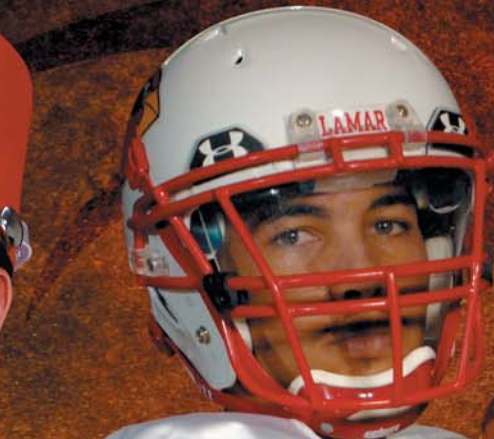


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Uncommon brew A cuppa . . . mokk-a

BRANDON THIBODEAUX

Karen (Hawa) Glavimans '73 travels, determined to bring a little of Europe to American coffee palates.

by Cynthia Hicks



Between Trader Joe's and Sprouts, Whole Foods and Balducci's, Glavimans works her contacts person to person when she's in the States. When she's at home in Holland, she makes cold calls to the list of stores where she would like to see her coffee on the shelves.

It's been a challenge and a little bit of an adventure, but Glavimans has built a coffee company with sales experience gained from 30 years as an insurance benefits consultant and business developer. Her company—Mokk-a—offers coffee connoisseurs four distinct blends from Sweden, Holland, France and Italy. The last time Glavimans stepped off into the unknown to build something from nothing, she ended up traveling Siberia—the end of a chapter in her work life that began in Dallas.

After earning a bachelor's degree in psychology, Glavimans, a Cardinal cheerleader and Alpha Chi Omega sorority member, moved to Dallas. Two tiring years of behind-the-desk work helped her decide she wanted to sell—real estate and then insurance. She ended up in employee benefits for 17 years and put that experience to work when she started her first business—part ownership in a small employee benefits consulting firm with multi-national corporate clients.

Burnout led to her "first crazy idea" and a business in Russia. She developed a benefits program for the 1,300 Russian workers for the first joint venture to drill for oil in Siberia. The formula of safety, oil production and performance allowed workers to earn monthly credits with which they could buy clothes, appliances, electronics and food from a catalog Glavimans produced.

"Everything was new then and just getting off the ground," Glavimans said. "We signed 28 contracts in the first six months. As it turned out I had to go to Siberia and travel from camp to camp to meet with each camp boss." It was 40 degrees below zero the first time she traveled to Siberia in December 1993. That was before Aeroflot airlines was privatized, and she flew three hours from Moscow to Raduzhny. "I almost died," Glavimans recalled. "The carpet was pulled up. Frans, my husband now, had one part of a seat belt. You had to hold your luggage in your lap. I've never prayed so hard

in my life. When we landed, the runway was covered in ice, and it was the smoothest landing I've ever had. When my eyes started running because of the cold, the tears just froze to my face." When she realized she needed to either move there or quit, she sold the company to her Joint Venture Partners and the camp's Portuguese catering company. "It was an interesting time," she said. "I knew how to say beer and thank you. That was the extent of my Russian."

It was during that adventure that she met her husband, and in 1995 she moved to Holland. In 2006, she was marketing coffee equipment in the U.S. for a company in Denmark and sent its coffee to Whole Foods, which expressed interest. With the difficulties inherent in trying to get a fresh product imported into the U.S. after 9/11 and the Homeland Securities Act, the president decided not to pursue the opening, but the idea nagged at Glavimans. An e-mail discussion with a Small Business Administration counselor culminated with, "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"I had this image of the most-loved coffee in Denmark. It was real hard to think I could create something without having them behind me," Glavimans said.

But when she was in Sweden for a weekend with friends, she particularly enjoyed the coffee at a café and chatted with the owner. The roaster was local, so she went to talk with him. "I said, 'I'm not sure what I'm wanting to do, but your coffee is really nice. Would you consider selling me the recipe?' He gave me the recipe for the blend. Europeans tend to think only Americans would try something so crazy," Glavimans said. "So I had one blend and wondered, 'Now, what am I gonna do?'"

A childhood friend lives in Italy. Her husband is now president of a consortium that promotes the export of Italian products to other countries. Glavimans asked her if she knew of a good coffee roaster in Italy. That opening led to a coffee Glavimans liked and a meeting with the roaster outside of Naples. After much talk, pizza and champagne, she bought her second blend/recipe.

With it in hand, Glavimans jumped on a plane to Houston, handed it to her roaster and said, "Go to work." She returned to Holland and, a few days later, drove to the

small village of Puligny-Montrachet in the Burgundy region of France after hearing about a small roaster there. "The guy was about 85 years old with a tiny little shop that looked like something out of a Harry Potter movie and one very small roaster. He said, 'No commercial. No commercial.' Of course, he only roasted for the village." Once she explained her interest and asked if he would consider selling the recipe for one of his coffees, Glavimans said, "He basically started talking about the blend and about how he roasted it. He handed me three bags of coffee, wished me luck and sent me on my way."

What became Mokk-a's Café Svenska, Café Italia and Café France went into the bags for the first time in November 2008, and the first sample went to Central Market. Her coffee was on the shelves in May 2009. "I came back in September," Glavimans said, "and they asked when I was going to expand the line again." She wanted to add a Dutch coffee, but "I tried a lot of coffees, and they weren't what I was looking for," she said. "I wanted a real Dutch coffee that was 100 percent high-grown arabicas." A friend's brother told her about a roaster with whom he played tennis. His family has been roasting for almost 200 years in one of the oldest villages in eastern Holland. The roaster agreed to work with her, so she added Café Holland to her line in March.

Café Italia is a blend of seven beans, while the other coffees are five-bean blends sourced from India, Africa, the Caribbean and South America. "It's just the recipes for these special blends developed by little roasters in various countries," she said. "They create a coffee the people in their country like."

"Every country has its little idiosyncrasies. I know in my head what I want, so I really have to search to find what I'm looking for, but so far I've been lucky," she said.

"What I'm finding in my tastings is that people's palates have evolved as people have gotten more into coffee. They've become connoisseurs of coffee and when they try my coffee, they like them."

Business continues to grow. Central Market anticipates further expansion of her line. She enlisted the help of professional tasters to find an Austrian coffee. "I had four different coffees, and we didn't like any of them." But she has found a Swiss blend and

took samples when she attended the Fancy Food Show in New York in June.

Central Market acknowledged Mokk-a as The Most Innovative New Product on the Market. "I just flipped. Central Market has been so supportive and so wonderful to work with," she said. Mokk-a is on the Whole Foods shelves in the southwest region, and Glavimans expects to be in Market Street stores in Dallas by September. She's found success with Kings Supermarkets in New Jersey and Balducci's in Maryland, another 30 stores. Trader Joe's likes her coffee but prefers a private label. Glavimans is considering whether or not to pursue



those 300 stores because, for now, she wants to build her brand rather than producing for another label. She has targeted Sprouts in Arizona and Whole Foods stores in England, as well as the 600 stores Marks and Spencer has in England and other parts of the world. She's also working on adding a Web shop to her site mokk-a.com.

Slowly, the business is starting to build. Having never worked in retail, she's learning as she goes. "So far, it's one of the top-selling coffees in Central Market. I've developed a big following there, so if I can do the same with Whole Foods and the rest of them, then we'll be fine."

Glavimans has been selling since 1976. "I'm used to the difficulties of getting to the person you need to talk to, and I have a lot of patience with it. That's what it takes," she said. "When I've trained sales people in the past, I've told them, in that first conversation, you connect with that person. If you can make a friend in that first conversation, then when you get in front of them, everything is easier."

Glavimans has made a few friends over cups of her coffees. She's looking for the next one to share a flavor with as she searches for the next perfect cup.