Planet Urth

Shallom and Jilla Berkman opened their first Caffé to make the world a better place—honest to God. Four locations later? Ka-ching!

COFFEE MATES: The Berkmans on the patio of the Melrose Urth Caffé

Shallom Berkman is a coffee snob. He deals only in organic fair-trade beans, knows just what kind of compost an heirloom bourbon or typica arabica plant prefers, and has traveled through the equatorial coffee belt to meet the farmers who grow the best beans. Working with Jan Eno, his roaster in Fort Bragg, north of San Francisco, Berkman determines what temperatures burnish which beans to their finest flavor. He's fascistic about how they're subsequently ground and brewed, buying $10,000 American-made Synesso espresso machines because the Italian competition has been found to have an intolerable three-degree variable in its water temperature. But Berkman, who drinks 15 cups of coffee a day, breaks the snob mold with a resounding thwack: He embraces all manner of gussied-up renditions. "I love coffee in every incarnation," he says, a smile spreading across his face. "With milk, without milk, with sugar, without sugar."

Shallom and his wife, Jilla, are the founders of Urth Caffé, a minichain they claim is the first exclusively organic roaster-café in the country. They have three shops

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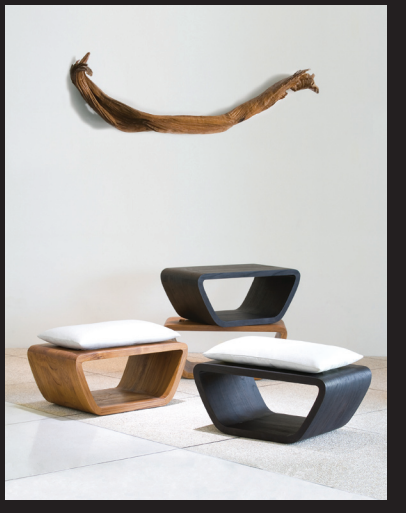

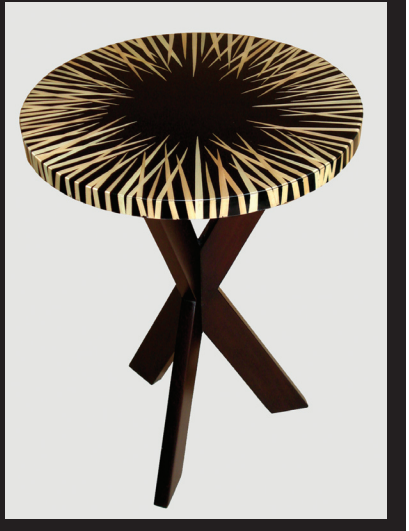

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FOLLOWING THE PATH: Berkman greeting farmers from the Kisoro collective in Uganda

in prime locations: Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood, Beverly Drive in Beverly Hills, and Main Street in Santa Monica. Their latest enterprise, the biggest yet, a $6 million, 14,000-square-foot behemoth, opens downtown this month. It sits on Hewitt Street east of Alameda, where defunct train tracks stretch to nowhere. Brad Korzen, CEO of the Kor Group, the powerhouse behind the Viceroy hotels and a number of upmarket condo and apartment complexes around town, solicited the Berkmans' business to sweeten the appeal of his fancy-schmancy 297-unit Barker Block lofts across the street. Korzen and his wife, designer Kelly Wearstler, are regulars at the Melrose Urth.

On any given day at any given Urth, sun streams through the windows, a piano concerto overrides the sounds of juicers and steaming wands, and vital-looking people coming back from yoga, or Sun Valley, or a Himalayan trek chat purposefully over granola made with Vermont grade-A amber maple syrup, French butter croissants, organic turkey breast *panini*, Scarborough Farms greens, and vegan chocolate cakes dense with single-estate Ecuadoran chocolate. They're sipping lattes, espressos, chais, bobas, and herbal teas—about 6,500 all told by closing time—and if one were to hazard a guess, those who didn't arrive on a bicycle valeted their Prius at the curb. A few loners are likely on hand, some with a MacBook as a prop, but they're only halfheartedly working the keys. Urth is a nexus of caffeinated serenity, an ideal of social connectivity.

The employees—predominantly young, predominantly Latino—set the tone, and it's hard not to marvel at their constant enthusiasm even in the face of relentless lines and demanding customers. They make eye contact when saying hello, smile with their "Have a good day." They have reason to be upbeat. Once they've been with Urth for three months, they receive 401(k), medical, and dental plans. After five years their family's medical and dental coverage is included. When a server brings Shallom a triple espresso during an interview, he shakes the employee's hand and thanks him by name. "We never wanted people to work for us and have nothing to show for it," he says. "That would make us feel like failures."

The Berkmans opened their first Caffé in Manhattan Beach in 1991, just as the specialty coffee wave was swelling. Seattle-based Starbucks debuted in L.A. the same year, introducing a new vocabulary to the morning: grande, venti, half-caf, no whip, Frappuccino. The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, whose first store opened in Brentwood in 1963, began dividing and multiplying in earnest in the '80s. Berkeley-based Peet's Coffee & Tea showed up in Pasadena in 1997, peddling brews as strong as belts of Old Grand-Dad. By then, the freeze-dried likes of Maxim and Yuban had long been barred from polite company, and every coffee in a paper cup had a name and a provenance.

In recent years, though, the chains have lost their cachet, appearing opposite each other—and themselves—on every street corner. Starbucks started an entertainment division. It made ice cream sold at Ralphs. The dark-roast tones and low lighting of Peet's, once so sophisticated, now appear unnecessarily somber. Fanatical arrivistes like Intelligentsia and Lamill Coffee have injected high-tech energy into café society of late, but Urth, ingeniously in tune with overtly relaxed, covertly aspirational Los Angeles, cloaks its elit-

ism with a populist welcome. Its colorful logo is a coffee cup with a plump red heart.

The Berkmans are unlikely moguls. They concentrate less on the big picture than on the pixels that form it. Jilla, who is 48, oversees the Caffés' design, choosing everything from the flowered tea canisters to the pendant lights to the furniture. It was her idea to use demo'd bricks from the downtown site, a 100-year-old egg factory, to make a coffee bar, and to reuse the beams for retail shelving. She hires each employee and manages the tea program—that's a massive photo of her family's tea estate in northern Iran on the back wall of the Beverly Hills store. Shallom, who is 38, handles everything coffee. At his insistence, no beans are ground until an order comes in. The extraction times for espresso shots are monitored closely: 18 seconds for the lighter Urth Dolce roast, 28 seconds for the darker Urth Italia. The machines are back flushed three times each shift, and the espresso handles scoured twice. French press coffee is poured into thermal pots and tossed after 20 minutes. A fresh batch of milk is steamed for every latte or cappuccino, and a design—a duck, heart, swan, or leaf—is made in its foam. "Steaming milk is like knitting a sweater," Shallom says. "You have to knit it tight. It's intuitive." Baristas who don't catch on in three weeks are reassigned.

Because this sort of micromanaging makes Urth a haven for the chain weary, one has to wonder what impact the impending expansion will have. Plans are afoot for a Pasadena store, and Shallom expects the kitchen of the downtown Urth to "power ten Caffés." So far the Berkmans have been choosy. "When we turned down the Staples Center, everyone thought we were crazy," Jilla says. "But just because a place would make a lot of money doesn't mean it will make us happy." Even mindful expansion, however, has a way of obliterating the very qualities that made expansion seem like a good idea in the first place. Starbucks, which announced plans to lay off more than 12,000 employees and close 600 stores earlier this year, was once a visionary's bouncy baby.

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On a late spring afternoon, five of Urth's top baristas gather in the Berkmans' kitchen for the weekly cupping. Jilla's handiwork is evident in the home, which is comfortable without being extravagant. The intricate patterns of silk Persian rugs interrupt the wood floors. Decorative tiles line the vaulted opening of a skylight in the den. Seven paper cups filled with medium and dark roasts sit on a round table, each next to a numbered bag of beans. Shallom, who is six feet and barrel-chested and has the fresh-scrubbed look of a Boy Scout leader, is wearing an Urth T-shirt, cargo shorts, and running shoes. "The greatest tool for evaluating coffee is comparison," he says, standing in front of an 18-year-old espresso machine enshrined in an alcove whose arching tiles proclaim WE PROUDLY SERVE URTH CAFFÉ COFFEE. "You won't know how good a coffee is until you put it up against another."

Shallom invites a barista named Antonio to "break the crust" and breathe in the first and strongest aroma. The rest of the team follow, dipping their spoons and sipping noisily as they aerate and assess, then swallow or spit into bowls. Instead of metaphor-bastardizing winespeak, the comments are simple. "Good." "Lots of flavor." "Citrusy." A cheer goes up when the favorite turns out to be a coffee from Uganda.

The brew was a long time coming. In 2004, a patron of the Beverly Hills Urth requested Ugandan coffee. Shallom said he didn't know the country grew coffee. A few weeks later a 30-pound sack of raw beans riddled with

sticks and stones arrived at the Caffé. Shallom sent it north to Eno for roasting, then brewed it. Terrible. The patron, a Ugandan named Colin Kakiza, got the message to president Yoweri Museveni, who invited Shallom for a visit. Shallom spent two weeks touring the country and observing Uganda's coffee production. The processing plants were deficient and sometimes up to 18 hours away from the farmers. Bags of cherries, from which the beans should be immediately extracted upon harvest, rotted on the roadside. The price for unprocessed beans was so low, 30 cents a pound, that it didn't even cover the cost of getting them to market.

Shallom reported back to Museveni. "I told him, 'I don't know what you expect from me, I'm a tiny little company,'" he says in the cadence a teacher might use when reciting a fable. "'But I love this country, I have a feeling for it. It has touched my heart. I am going to select a spot in your country to grow world-class coffee, and we will invest the money for all the processing equipment and training. We'll stay until we create a world-class farm, and we'll tell everybody about it, including the coffee industry of America. I'll do coffee expos and show other experts. And when they taste the quality of the coffee, they will come and invest as well. They'll attract the industry back to Uganda.'" Museveni loved the plan.

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Shallom picked Kisoro, where the Virunga mountain range provides rich volcanic soil and coffee-growing areas at up to 9,000 feet—coffee loves altitude. Even better, the area is home to 325 mountain gorillas, the endangered species Dian Fossey devoted her life to studying in Rwanda. The apes, the largest in the world, have been decimated by tribal and political wars, poachers, and farmers who consider them pests. Urth could grow premium organic coffee while promoting conservation of the gorillas and their rain forest habitat. From a marketing and save-the-planet perspective, Kisoro was a jackpot.

Coffee is one of the world's most chemically treated food commodities. DDT, malathion, BHT, and petroleum-based chemical fertilizers are commonly used in its production. In order to belong to the Urth collective and use its equipment, the Virunga farmers must abide by its rules. No chemicals or pesti-

cides. Cross-cropping and composting to keep the soil fertile. They must pass annual certified-organic inspections (which Urth pays for and a third party carries out) and plant heirloom shade-loving bourbon or typica arabica coffee trees. Sun-tolerant varieties, which produce 70 percent of the coffee on the market, bear more fruit but are environmentally disastrous. A massive swath of the globe's rain forests, which absorb carbon dioxide and cool the equatorial girdle while sheltering rare birds, animals, and medicinal plants, has been destroyed to make way for the hybrids.

persevere, assuring them that the yields would increase as their plants became more established. But it was the Berkmans' nine-year-old daughter, Golda, and her friend Abbie who offered the most convincing incentive. Under the banner of Girls for Gorillas, they raised $600 each to buy dairy cows for the farmers with the best beans.

"The key to success in taste and yield is the quality of the compost," Shallom says. "If you don't have livestock for manure, you have to save all the debris from your fruit, the cherries from the coffee plants, and the organic

The second Urth debuted in 1994. On opening day, Shallom and Jilla had $250 between them. They couldn't afford patio furniture or kitchen equipment.

Farming organically can be a tiresome business in a Third World country, particularly when your chemical-spraying, hybrid-using neighbors are hauling in double your yield. For the 12 Virunga farmers, the payoff is the price Urth offers for premium triple-sorted beans—$5 a pound. In February, when Eno and Shallom visited the farmers, they prevailed on them to

debris from your home, and you have to stir it and keep it covered for a year." Shallom used the girls' largesse to buy cows for the two farmers he deemed "the best stewards of the land." The men wept when they received the animals, both of which were pregnant and have since calved. "From then on," says Shallom, "every farm I went to, they said, 'Give me cow. Can't do it without a cow. Impossible.'" Next year he will buy cows for every farmer in the collective.

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Born in East L.A. in 1970, Shallom has the bona fides of a '60s child. "My parents were hippies," he says. "Extremely New Age." His mother left to join Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's commune in Oregon when Shallom was ten. His dad worked as a music teacher, a real estate agent, and a bus driver but "never found his passion," according to Shallom. As a teenager, Shallom became fascinated by the teachings of a medium named Gerry Bowman, who claimed to channel John the Apostle on a weekly radio show, KIEV's *Out of the Ordinary*. When he was 17, with money from his father, Shallom joined Bowman and 40 other seekers on a group tour of "power points" in Greece and Egypt. One of the highlights was a late-night channeling session in the king's chamber of Khafre, Giza's second-largest pyramid. "What I remember about Shallom is that he was very energetic, very inquisitive," says Bowman, who now lives in Worcester, Massachusetts. "He wanted to know about everything, and he genuinely cared about other people."

On his return from Egypt, Shallom entered tenth grade—for the third time. "Seeing the world had changed my identity," he says. "I realized my destiny was not in school. I was not going to be a doctor or lawyer or accountant. I stood up in the middle of biology class at Hollywood High, smiled at the teacher, and said, 'Good-bye.' I never went back." He opened the Lighthouse Fellowship in Sherman Oaks, a psychic shop offering massages, readings, and channeling. "Lots of channeling," he says. He dreamed of starting a store selling eco-friendly household goods—biodegradable toilet paper, nontoxic soaps—but needed money. He applied for a job at Futuretronics at the Westside Pavilion.

Jilla Sharif, the store's manager, had been instructed to hire a salesperson immediately. Although Berkman showed up dripping with sweat (he had bicycled to the interview) and with no discernible expertise, she gave him the job. Her bosses wanted a body? They got one.

The daughter of two doctors, Jilla was born in Kurdistan and raised in Tehran. She married before graduating from college. When her husband fled the country at the outset of the Iranian revolution, she was left behind with their baby. Authorities seized their house and cars and froze her bank account; eventually she and her three-year-old daughter managed to escape by horseback over the Zagros Mountains into Turkey. Jilla has an uncomplicated smile and soft, round eyes underscored by a thin trace of brown eyeliner. She is five foot two and dresses simply, often in jeans and a cardigan. When she talks about her employees, whose stories she knows by heart, or describes the Japanese tea farmer who feeds his plants sardine bones and prays for her family every morning, you get the sense that she stores such heartfelt information in her gut rather than in her head. But there's no mistaking her drive.

When Shallom and Jilla met, she was the coffee connoisseur. "It gave me a stomachache," he says. In an attempt to woo her, he'd go out of his way to bring her the best beans and brews he could find, and he soon developed a taste for them himself. In 1989, the two bought a booth at an Eco Expo, where he sold green cleaning products and Jilla sold coffee. "Everybody came to us," she says, "drinking coffee, coffee, coffee." There they met a Peruvian farmer named Jorge.

"He told us an incredible story that changed our life," Shallom says. "He came from a poor village in Peru where the villagers had no education, no hospital, a very poor quality of life. They saved up enough money to send one child out of the country to get educated, and he did very well. He eventually graduated from UC San Diego as an agronomist. He went back to his village and said, 'We're going to get rid of chemicals. I'm going to teach you ancient and modern techniques to help you grow the best fruits and vegetables and coffee that anyone has ever tasted. And we're going to charge an arm and a leg for them in order to have a better quality of life.'" Jorge's story prompted Shallom and Jilla to start a coffee company where they could sell his beans. "We have to support Jorge," Jilla said.

The name Urth Caffé blends the Welsh for "earth" and the Italian for "coffee," which to the Berkmans translates as "natural coffee." At their first Caffé, a 300-square-foot spot in Manhattan Beach, they started with Jorge's beans. Period. No drip, no espressos, no lattes. What kind of crazy café is this? customers wanted to know. After a few weeks, responding to slow sales and customer demand, they bought a coffeemaker. Then bagels, cream cheese, muffins, and teas. Soon the Caffé was serving 200 customers between 6 and 9 a.m. alone.

Shallom and Jilla's relationship was deepening. For Shallom it had been love at first sight. "I felt like I'd been hit with a sledgeham-

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mer," he says. Jilla, a single mother working two jobs, was less interested. "There was no time to go out," she says. "If we did, it was to Souplantation, and we always went dutch. To this day, this is his worst memory." She looks at Shallom and giggles. They're sitting next to each other at a wrought-iron table on the patio of Urth in Beverly Hills. "I didn't have any money," he says. "I didn't care," she says.

After four years in Manhattan Beach, they were ready for a bigger space. Shallom's grandfather, Al Berkman, a music teacher and voice coach who counted Linda Ronstadt among his pupils, offered them his former school, a 900-square-foot property on Melrose Avenue that was being leased by a wicker-furniture store. With $200,000 raised from a handful of customers and family members, the second Urth debuted in 1994. On opening day, Shallom and Jilla had $250 between them. They couldn't afford patio furniture or kitchen equipment. A caterer delivered a limited menu. The place immediately caught on.

By now the couple's relationship had turned romantic. Attempts to pinpoint when get glancing replies. Shallom remembers a dinner at Gladstone's. "It was a full moon, and we went for a walk on the beach," he says. "I said to Jilla, 'I have to tell you something. I love you.' She said, 'I love you, too.' I said, 'So, can I kiss you now?' She said, 'No.'"

"We knew each other for seven years and never lived together, not even for one day, before getting married," Jilla says on two occasions. "We are total opposites!" she says one afternoon as we drive to California Pottery and Tile Works, where she's overseeing the designs for the downtown site's 50-foot clock tower. Shallom is steering their Lincoln Navigator with his left hand, holding Jilla's with his right. "I'm short, he's tall," Jilla continues. "I'm Muslim, he's Jewish. We call ourselves World Peace."

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The Urths are a curious and contradictory amalgam. Their breezy atmosphere, organic menu, and hum of good intention conjure a New Age vibe, which muffles the constantly churning gears behind a business that sees 6,000 customers a day and that Shallom says generates $17 million a year. While the Berkmans are zealots about the quality of their products, they've yet to hire a publicist to promote them. The stores are known for celebrity sightings—Jen, Leo, Jake and Reese, Adrian and his entourage have been snapped on the premises—but are void of the attitude that usually works its way into such places. The Melrose Urth, in particular, has evolved into a next-generation Ivy. Paris Hilton arrived one evening earlier this year with a gray-haired, bearded fellow in the orange robes of a holy man. The two spoke quietly over a book called *The Path of the Painted Shaman*. Paparazzi bulbs flashed wildly when, as she left, she unfastened a necklace with a heart-shaped pendant and handed it to a customer seated on the patio. "The greatest gift is to give," she said demurely before taking off in her Range Rover. Hilton's companion, it turned out, was Maxie J. Santillan Jr., an actor whose upcoming projects include *Life Is Hot in Cracktown*.

When John Morton walked into the Melrose Urth in 1999, all he was after was lunch. Because he doesn't eat pork, onions, or garlic, dining out can be a challenge. "It's the measure of a restaurant as to how they deal with that," he says. "Do they say, 'Too bad, take it or leave it' or 'Let us work with you'? I always find it interesting." Morton was impressed when he heard that Shallom had gone outside the Caffé to buy ingredients for his order. He became a return customer and inquired about investing in a Santa Monica

Urth. "I was just coming out of the tech wreck and felt like I couldn't trust anyone," he says. "Shallom said he wanted investors who are truly Urth customers, not people who are only here for the business angle, for the dollars. That's an unusual ethic to have in a business, where the primary motivation is usually moneymaking."

Morton has since become Urth's largest investor. By profession he is the spiritual director for the Church of the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, or MSIA, a New Age, Christ-based ecumenical group that promotes "soul transcendence" and positive thinking (Insight Seminars is an offshoot). The organization was started by Roger Hinkins, a onetime Mormon from Utah who says he saw auras as a child. When he was in his late twenties, after waking from a post-operative coma, Hinkins felt that John the Apostle—the same spirit Bowman channels—had entered his body. He changed his name to John-Roger and in 1968 started MSIA. According to its tenets, Jesus Christ represents the original Mystical Traveler, a mantle that was passed through the ages before landing on John-Roger's shoulders. In 1988, he transferred the title to Morton. Arianna Huffington, Sally Kirkland, and Leigh Taylor-Young, the former *Peyton Place* actress to whom Morton is engaged, are among MSIA's celebrity adherents.

Urth's group of 100 or so investors now includes a good portion of MSIA devotees. Although the Berkmans do not belong, the group's social values dovetail with their ethics. "Imagine our luck," says Shallom, "when we need substantial equity partners and this caliber of person comes to us with the same love and vision. Incredible." Imagine, too, that Berkman finds himself allied with another John the Apostle channeler. "I just found that out earlier this year," he says. "It sent shock waves up and down my back! That is really interesting." MSIA is headquartered in a West Adams mansion previously owned by Busby Berkeley and has real estate holdings in Santa Monica and Santa Barbara. Its financial support of Urth has been significant. "I really owe it to them," says Berkman.

Sitting in the living room of the Pacific Palisades home he shares with Taylor-Young, Morton remembers Shallom's resistance to raising prices a few years ago, when escalating food costs were cutting into Urth's profits. Morton and others on Urth's pro bono board met with him. "We said, 'Shallom, do you want to lower the quality?' 'No, I can't do that!' 'OK, what are the other options? Either you lower the quality or you raise the prices.' He said, 'I don't want to do either.'" Eventually Berkman agreed to a minimal price hike. "He had so much anxiety," says Morton. "And the irony was that customers came and put their arms around him and said, 'It's OK, we understand.' I think you can tell that Shallom and Jilla don't have giant aspirations to pile up large sums of money. That's just not what drives them." The Berkmans' inspiration, after all, was Jorge, the prodigal Peruvian from the Eco Expo.

As it happens, Jorge Cebreros is a Mexican American who grew up in San Diego, where he now oversees the aloes at the zoo. "I remember Shallom," he says. "We did a publicity tour once. Nice guy. But I don't know where he got that story."

There are portions of the Berkmans' creation myth that ring true. After graduating from the College of the Redwoods in 1978, Jorge missed out on a park ranger job and hitchhiked to "the largest forest I could find," he says, "the Amazon." He landed in Peru and befriended a man with an enormous *finca*, where he learned about growing organic coffee. His sister-in-law at the time, Karen Cebreros, came to visit. "Jorge kept saying, 'These people are so poor, what can we do to help them?'" she says. "We decided: coffee." Jorge spread the organic word and helped the farmers grow beans. Karen went back to San Diego and started Elan Organic Coffees, now a highly regarded importer and distributor. She has worked with the Berkmans for years. Jorge returned to the United States in 2000.

Shallom appears happy to hear the Jorge update, unfazed by the gulf between his version of the story and the truth. "It was so long ago I must have confused things in my mind," he says. "I'm glad to have it straightened out." Whether sculpted or misremembered, the Jorge fable is telling. The Berkmans chose to build their company on a tale of community, conservation, and idealism, on the idea that the little-guy coffee producer is as important as the celebrity latte sipper. This year Morton visited a tribe of indigenous Colombians called the Arhuaco, who speak their own language and live in a remote region northeast of Cartagena. They have been growing organic coffee for 14 years but are unknown outside their country, in large part because access to their farms is so difficult. When Morton entered their beans, roasted by Eno, in one of Shallom's weekly blind cuppings, they were a hit. Now Urth is devising a strategy to work with the Arhuaco, and Shallom is casting his eye around the equator for a new country, maybe Ethiopia, to explore. The Jorge paradigm, a global version of Johnny Appleseed, carries on. The concept is at once old-fashioned and New Age, savvy and ingenuous, but perhaps most surprising, successful beyond anyone's imagining. ■