



SPILL THE BEANS

Whether you like yours strong and by the shot, in a large takeaway cup on the morning commute or prefer mulling over an aromatic cup with friends, there's no mistaking it, coffee is everywhere.



Drip by drip, the caffeinated nectar has filtered into all of our lives and is now the world's second most-traded commodity, trumped only by oil. While Americans drink more than three cups on average a day, it's actually Scandinavia that boasts the biggest caffeine highs: the Finnish reportedly consume nine cups daily.

Since the powerful beans were discovered centuries ago, every culture has mastered its own unique variation of the drink – from milky lattes to Turkish coffee – and with them their own ideas of how to make the best. It's a big caffeinated world out there and everyone's a critic.

Navigating this world is tough, especially for the many of us who like to judge the standard of coffee on the quality of its 'latte art'. Here we'll lift the foam, put our nose to the grind and find out to recognise a decent cup of joe.

Coffee snobs

We live in an age of coffee snobbery. Known as the third wave of coffee, this surge of independent and artisan coffee shops was a reaction to the Starbucks frenzy of the early 2000s.

While big name coffee giants flooded our high streets and malls – coffee shops shot up from 525 to 17,400 between 1992 and 2003 in the US – the growing demand for quality coffee drove the caffeine-loving community to take business into their own hands, literally.

"Coffee is now much more about the science," explains Laura Bratti, Head of Training at London's Artisan Coffee School. "It's more about the chemistry and what's actually going on inside."

Coffee, however, is a delicate business. Between picking, sorting, roasting and shipping, the coffee has undertaken a massive journey before reaching our lips,

This page, top to bottom: Artisan Coffee School; Artisan Coffee School students; Pouring a Raw Coffee chemex. Opposite page: Raw coffee.

meaning there are plenty of moments where it could go wrong.

Most local coffee places serve espresso-based coffee which, Laura tells me, should have “a beautiful, full-bodied and complex flavour” and the crema, (that’s the espresso’s creamy top layer), should be “syrupey, velvety and not too messy”.

One marker of a bad coffee is that all-too-common bitter, almost burnt taste. In fact, Ric Rhinehart, Executive Director of the Speciality Coffee Association (SCA), reveals that one of the biggest misconceptions about coffee is that it’s meant to be bitter; “It should be a sweet and balanced beverage, easy to enjoy.”

That unsavoury burnt taste could mean all kinds of mistakes: a lazy barista, the wrong grind, bad brewing or over-roasting.

“It’s like cooking a chicken,” simplifies Laura. “If you cook it for too long, it’s going to burn and introduce char-y flavours.”

If you the idea of roast-chicken coffee leaves you with a bad taste in your mouth, then you certainly won’t want to know that one of the most common reasons for the burnt taste is dirty equipment.

“You can do everything absolutely perfectly with care and attention,” she says. “But if you don’t regularly clean the parts of your machine that come into contact with the coffee you will introduce burnt, stale and unpleasant flavours.”

Red flags

Fortunately, there are red flags to watch out for that will save you from the disappointment of a bad cup of coffee.

Kim Thompson, Owner of the UAE’s Raw Coffee Company, tells us it’s important to check the beans in the grinder – “if the beans look oily or black, don’t go there” – secondly, make sure the coffee is ground fresh to order, as “the flavour diminishes as quickly as two minutes after grinding”.

Lastly she advises scoping out the equipment. “If the milk wand has scum and build up on the tip it isn’t being cleaned properly,” adding that, “A loud screeching sound when they’re heating the milk means they’re not doing it correctly.”

However, without hopping the counter and carrying out a full inspection every time you want a cappuccino, how can you ensure you’re getting quality? Turns out the easiest way is to simply ask the barista.

While it’s true that the barista’s coffee-wielding abilities are the last step in the beans’ long journey, any good coffee shop will be able to tell you about the whole process. Plus, a passion for what they’re doing is a good indicator of a barista’s coffee-making skills.

“Ask them about the coffee,” Kim advises. “Any barista that’s been trained and cares about what they do will love sharing this information.”

They should be able to tell you where the beans are farmed, processed, their key flavours and whether it’s ‘speciality coffee’ – beans are graded out of 100 and

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only those that reach 85 per cent of more qualify as speciality.

Origins

The term 'single origin' is bandied around coffee shops, often heralded as a marker of a superior cup. However, it turns out that's not necessarily true. Single-origin simply means the beans are sourced from one farming area and it seems their biggest selling point is more to do with the idea than the taste itself.

As Laura says, "It's nice to be able to taste where the coffee comes from and you can talk about the flavour a lot more."

Agreeing, Kim, who sources Raw's coffee from Addis, Ethiopia, explains, "I like to have that emotional

connection of knowing where the coffee comes from, visualising the farm and the people who farm the coffee."

Connoisseurs often see single origin as a purer way to enjoy coffee, which is why it tends to be reserved for black coffees. While a blend, which combines different beans and complementary flavours, are often reserved for milkier concoctions.

It would be a mistake to discount a good blend though, claims Laura: "We have a blend from four South American countries and they give chocolatey, nutty, caramel flavours that work really well together."

Back to the roots

You'll find the beans growing anywhere with a suitable climate and while Brazil is the largest producer of the



Top to bottom: Coffee extraction; Turkish coffee being poured; Turkish coffee process.

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crop, coffee is actually rooted some 10,000km away in Ethiopia.

The 1000-year-old legend tells of a young shepherd called Kaldi, who noticed that his flock of goats had a real kick in their step after eating some unknown berries. Trying them himself, he experienced the first caffeine buzz.

From there the stories vary, but the beans were roasted, boiled in water and the brew was adopted by Yemen's Sufi where it became qahwa, or Arabic coffee.

By the 16th century coffee houses were popular in Istanbul, the centre of the Ottoman Empire and from there it quickly swept across Europe – it is said that Pope Clement VIII was a big – and the globe.

So when looking for the truest form of coffee, the Arabian peninsula is a good place to start. Small, black and often flavoured with cardamom and other spices, Arabic coffee is almost unrecognisable to espresso drinkers.

“Every country in the Middle East seems to have their own unique spin of coffee, utilising different roast profiles, spices and techniques,” explains Kathikeyan Rajendran, the three-time UAE Cezve/Ibrik Champion.

He says that Arabic coffee, for example, tends to be boiled for much longer than its Turkish cousin, resulting in a darker, more bitter brew. Regardless of method, it's an ancient craft, using special copper pots (ibriks or cezves) heated over hot plates or hot sand, and as such coffee is deeply rooted in Arabic culture.

“Arabic coffee served from a dallah [a traditional pot] is an important aspect of hospitality in Arab societies,” Kathikeyan tells me. In fact, traditional Turkish style brews still makes up 60 per cent of the coffee market in Jordan.

Not that this has stopped more ‘western’ style espressos making their mark. In the UAE, Kim is confident they “have the ability to ‘lure’ some of those traditional coffee drinkers to the new wave of speciality coffee”.

While there are ways to recognise a quality espresso, with the smorgasbord of coffees out there, it's impossible to confidently define a perfect cup of joe. So next time you're rushing to work, coffee clasped reassuringly in hand, give a little thought to the journey those little beans have taken before they fuel your day.

