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COFFEE STYLE

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COFFEE AS CRAFT

Coffee isn't what it used to be. A new culture is emerging, with innovators and artisans searching for the highest quality coffee possible with which to seduce us. There is care put into every detail: the origin of the beans, how they are roasted, and the finest way to prepare and present a cup of coffee. These “coffee people” love to talk about what they do, and how they do it.

So, let's talk *Coffee Style*.

WHAT IS COFFEE STYLE , and since when has coffee become so fashionable? Aren't we talking about that bitter drink waking us up every morning and getting us through the day? We are indeed, but there are those who believe that coffee is much, much more. That it is special. Call them coffee stylists. They treat coffee, or java, as it is also known, with the same reverence as others do fine wine. To be afforded such treatment, the product must be unique, and what is called specialty coffee is made of only the finest beans. These coffee enthusiasts are fashioning an artisanal product that, it would seem, we are now all too ready to buy.

These days we as consumers want to know about what we are eating, and both the quality and the source of our food have become of paramount importance. We now demand organic vegetables, home-made bread or even low-sugar lemonade. Coffee is no different.

And coffee stylists have answers. They know where their product comes from, who grows it and exactly what variety of bean goes into every cup. And they like to discuss what they know – both in person and online – in order to change our very concept of what coffee is. In the cafés, this starts with the signage and continues face to face with the baristas. They communicate the story of the coffee they serve, a story that begins at the origin and ends in the cup. In the virtual realm, these boutique operations reach a global community of coffee lovers. You can search for #coffeestyle to join them.

The scene we are looking at in *Coffee Style*, however, is primarily located in the cafés one finds in cities throughout the world. It is where baristas show off their skills and demonstrate their meticulous attention to detail. They do not simply make an espresso but aim for that ever-elusive and difficult to define “god shot”, the perfect espresso. They do not simply pour filter coffee, they celebrate it. They do not use just any coffee maker but rather operate sophisticated apparatuses that were designed to impress.

But it is not merely show. *Coffee Style* searches for flavours one would not expect from coffee. In Italy, we found espresso smooth enough to roll around in your mouth; in London, filter coffee came dressed in the aroma of chocolate-coated strawberries; in Berlin, grapefruit and elderflower revealed an espresso's juicy body over ice; and black coffee with soda and cream brightened the day in San Francisco's foggiest neighbourhood.

The care and knowledge these baristas and entrepreneurs devote to the cups they prepared for us made it clear that this was going to be a revelatory taste experience. And it was. Once you go beyond the bitter beverage of old, there is no looking back.

Welcome to *Coffee Style*!









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WAKING UP

SHAPING COFFEE CULTURE

Coffee in the twenty-first century is more than just a quick caffeine fix. It has become part of our lives – indeed a lifestyle. What was once a mass-market product is now a specialty item. So how did this happen?

Third wave coffee makers are fiercely independent and specialized, more fiercely into details. There is a focus on science and sourcing and coffee as an agricultural product right through to the artistic side, like latte art and style.

HUGH DUFFIE, CO-FOUNDER
SANDOWS COLD BREW, LONDON

The story of specialty coffee represents a small revolution. It is a revolution that developed in three waves and that has changed coffee culture forever. The scene has its genesis in the late 1960s, in California's Bay Area, lodged between green hills and the blue Pacific, an area rife with opposition to the status quo. People were widening their horizons, looking differently at society, and coffee too was swept up in this era of change.

Coffee has long been a part of modern life. With innovations such as vacuum packaging and instant coffee, coffee became widely available and thus a broad commercial success. With the advent of modern advertising after the Second World War – during and after which coffee was traded on the black market – and particularly with the power of television, the post-war economic boom witnessed the development of a true coffee culture, and the beverage was widely consumed each and every day.

The only demand by consumers was that coffee be readily available and that it be cheap. Traded on the mercantile exchanges of London and New York, coffee arrived to the West in containers stuffed with Robusta beans, a variety that delivers what its name implies: robust plants that are high in caffeine. It was a quick fix.

And while today the mass-market industry is essentially unchanged, it was disrupted in the 1960s, when Northern California produced the first wave of specialty coffee.

The movement started in Berkeley, with Alfred Peet, the son of a Dutch coffee roaster, who, tired of the poor-quality product then popular, sought to introduce the better-tasting coffee he remembered from his youth in Europe. So he imported high-quality beans from faraway places and roasted them in small batches. At his retail shop, Peet's, the Arabica bean established a foothold in the United States. While the Arabica species is richer in flavour than most Robusta beans, its cultivation requires greater care and is thus more expensive. It is the foundation of the specialty coffee that, during the next wave of its evolution, would become a global phenomenon.

The second wave took off in the 1980s, in Seattle, the home of Starbucks. The first owners originally bought their beans from Peet's, and later expanded their business into a global chain with cafés in every metropolis in the world.

In the United States, Starbucks' cafés introduced a public weaned on soft drinks to a whole range of espresso-based beverages. Instead of popping out for a Coca-Cola, people began to "go for a cup of coffee". And the media helped to create this new image. Soon, to-go cups began to appear in Hollywood movies, and coffee shops featured as settings for TV sitcoms such as *Friends* or *Ellen*.

Coffee went from being a simple part of everyday life into an experience lifestyle with flavour, and this phenomenon spread throughout the world. Coffee-dedicated shops began appearing in urban centres, not all but many of

them Starbucks, which grew into a corporation not unlike the coffee industry's big players – the very companies specialty coffee first took on. But coffee culture was soon to experience another transformation.

The third wave certainly owes a great deal to the transformations that preceded it. Peet's and Starbucks had opened the market for a new generation that then took the coffee culture a step further.

This new generation made specialty coffee even more special, forging closer relationships with growers and becoming more savvy in selling their product. They began to source small batches of coffee and introduced changes to the style of roasting. Moving away from the so-called espresso roast in which the beans reach a dark brown colour providing a predictable and consistent taste, a more gentle roasting was used to preserve the diverse flavours within the bean. Variety was thus added to the mix.

The difference is best noted in filtered coffee. But we are not talking about the traditional machine-filtered cup. Rather cafés began to feature a so-called slow bar: a stage for an array of drip cones for hand-poured filtered coffee and for captivating conversation with well-informed baristas. Stumptown and Intelligentsia, cafés in Portland and Chicago, respectively, are largely credited with this new celebration of coffee. Coffee shops became locations with backstories, their employees “rock star baristas”. In the new millennium, making, talking and tasting coffee has become a cultural experience.

The coffee style we are looking at today represents in some sense a step back. While the brand and the preparation of a cup are still a large part of the story, the new stars of the scene are the producers. There is a renewed respect for the agricultural product: “Calling coffee by its first name”, as Peter Giuliano, former

director of coffee at Counter Culture Coffee in Durham, North Carolina, put it. He was at the forefront of the trend of buying coffee directly from farmers, a type of fair-trade model but with higher prices for growers and, consequently, for consumers. This cost increase had to be explained, and it thus became part of the story.

The story of coffee naturally begins at its origins, but it is ultimately recounted in homes, cafés and roasteries, where custom-designed stickers and informational material accompany the different bean varieties. We are speaking generally of single-origin coffees, in other words coffee from a single region or even a single collection of beans. The labels typically identify the name of the grower, the altitude of the farm and the harvest process. Buying online, one can find a coffee produced at 1,400 metres by the Ejo Haza Women's Group in the Rutsiro region of Rwanda. Compare this to a bag of supermarket coffee that simply gives the origin as Brazil – what we have is quite a different story.

While one may ask why this information is important, the implications are considerable. For one, this is a good indication of quality. As a rule of thumb, the higher altitude the farm, the better the coffee. And small batches from small plantations promise exclusivity. But ultimately, the story behind the production stirs one's imagination: just imagine an all-female collective of civil war survivors who grow their own coffee.

It is this sort of storytelling that makes specialty coffee so attractive to modern consumers. It transforms something as commonplace as coffee into a product with a history and, as its best, an ethical backstory. It introduces new flavours to us, and it is personal – at the heart of this global movement are people who make, serve and love exceptional coffee.

Theo COFFEE





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