

Espresso Coffee – What's it all about?

Craig McKenzie



A coffee consultant! That's a good one; what on earth does he do? Well, it is not just a great thing to say at parties, especially around a bunch of lawyers. To put it simply, all things to do with the production of a good

coffee are my domain. From observing and writing about the growing of coffee, to lectures and book writing on how to produce the perfect tasting example of this flavourful beverage most of us love.

With a deep, rich jammy, caramel sweetness of a classic Sumatra Mandheling rebounding on my palate ten minutes after my last sip of coffee, the thought of what makes a good espresso, particularly in a café situation, is in the forefront of my mind. After much time working, observing, advising and covering most areas in the coffee industry, a few things ring true time and time again with a certain clarity, just like an excellent Costa Rican Tarzú on one's palate – (one of the world's outstanding coffees).

First and foremost, it is the person, the maker, the barista behind the espresso machine that can make or break a good coffee. He or she is the final and most important link in the coffee chain. The coffee, and most particularly, the flavour oil i.e. *crema*, is a delicate and finite thing when made with an espresso machine. The coffee should only be expressed just so much as to extract the true essence. Have you ever had a bitter or astringent coffee in a café? We all have and in most cases this is an over-extracted coffee where too much water has been allowed to push through the ground coffee and extract the bitter tannic acids. Even the best, most expensive coffee blend can be ruined by sloppy coffee making practices. I recently had a terrible coffee in a place in the CBD that prides itself on supplying a special, exclusive Italian coffee blend that sounds like a flower found in ponds and billabongs. Even the mightiest can be ruined at this critical point. As a rule of thumb, frequent places where there is one person working on the espresso machine. This person is more likely to understand the principles of great espresso coffee; places such as Sumo in Little Collins Street, Piccolo in Flinders Lane, Caffee Biscotti, off Block Arcade are where the baristas will even know your regular order. It is a special touch to have a truly custom made coffee espressly for you.

Apart from a consistent passionate barista, one should look for such things as *crema* on the top of the coffee. *Crema* is the rich, brown emulsion topping on a short

black or the dark brown rim on a latte or a cappuccino – a tell tale sign of the perfect extraction of the ethereal coffee flavour oils we love so much. So let's hear the cry of 'where's the *crema*' echo from café to café down those canyons of commerce.

Fresh is best! Coffee ground and made on demand tastes notably more vibrant than pre-ground coffee which in comparison is dull and lifeless. A coffee bean is like a flavour capsule which holds in the flavour. Once ground, the surface areas exposed to air greatly increases and the flavour soon dissipates. Always frequent a place with a grinder close to the machine. The rule also applies when making coffee at home. If possible, buy small amounts and grind them as you need them.

Many other things come into play in the production of a great espresso coffee, which at its best can take you on a caffeine induced flavour journey. An immaculately clean machine is important; note if there are built-up encrustations on the steam wand. If so, prepare to recoil. The blend of the coffee is also important, but is mainly a personal taste. I contend that good coffee can be made with any fresh roasted 100% arabica coffee blend. Coffee preference is a highly subjective thing; the best coffee is the one you like. I tend to favour the deep rich smooth espresso coffees with very little bitterness; the type that Melbourne roasters and blenders excel at. Others tend to prefer those darker espresso blends popular in southern Italy. These display deep spicy notes, hints of bitterness and charcoal tones exemplified by Segafredo Coffee, a valid and good coffee. The great thing about the coffee world is that it is so varied and diverse; there is always a great taste experience around the corner.

So having just begun this coffee adventure, where are we going? How do I propose to take you there? Over the next few editions I will be covering many things that make up the world of coffee, such things as:

Convincing the partners of your firm that an office espresso machine is the most essential bit of office equipment after the telephone!

Craig McKenzie is co-writer and publisher of "How to make the best espresso coffee" available at ABC Shops and David Jones Food Hall.

