

Cooking Corner: Producing perfect cup of Joe can be an obsession

by Peter Rowe

While visiting Costa Rica's cloud forest region, Joe Behm was offered a cup of newly harvested, freshly roasted coffee.

He may never recover.

The fresher the better when selecting the right coffee beans for your morning cup of joe. Photo by Anita L. Arambula. Americans drink more coffee than people from any other nation, draining 146 billion cups a year. Photo by Anita L. Arambula. "It was staggering," he said, "absolutely mind-blowing how good it was."

At first, Behm tried managing his new addiction, bringing home to California only a modest 15-pound bag. But when his stash ran out, his need did not. He abandoned his career in semiconductors to focus on an all-consuming desire to get his fix.

"I walked away from a nice six-figure job to where I could barely pay the mortgage," he said.

That was 12 years and one retirement fund ago. Behm is still in thrall to freshly roasted coffee, but today his obsession is paying off. He plowed \$800,000 into sketches, models and finally a product: a personal coffee roaster that can turn out 1-pound batches while sitting on your kitchen countertop.

Introduced in November 2007, the Behmor 1600 won the Specialty Coffee Association of America's award for best new product. To date, Behm has sold almost 5,000 units. Average price: \$300.

His market? Nearly everyone.

About 82 percent of Americans drink this stuff, estimates the National Coffee Association of U.S.A. Other surveys put the figure closer to 50 percent, but there's no question the U.S. slurps more coffee than any other nation, draining 146 billion cups a year.

If most people drink coffee, only a handful drink, eat and sleep java. Coffee roasters have taken a relaxed morning ritual and turned it into a full-time job and lifetime obsession. They roam Central America, Africa and Indonesia, buying direct from farmers and co-ops. They fire up antique roasters capable of hitting 1,300 degrees. And they obey their own quirky set of coffee commandments.

"It's such a subjective business," admitted Jesse Fox of Caffe Calabria in San Diego. "Everybody's got a different formula, a different way of roasting."

The experts, though, are unanimous about the brew most Americans drink.

Do you buy supermarket beans?

Frappuccinos from "Charbucks?"

Canned coffee?

If so, the experts have one word for you: ick.

"One hundred thirty million people drink coffee every day in the United States," Behm said. "If they knew what they were drinking, they'd have a coronary."

LIZARD LATTE

Torrey Lee was born into the business. Perhaps that's why he tried to flee it.

Lee's stepfather, Bob Sinclair, founded the original Pannikin in 1968. Lee remembers the San Diego establishment dumping green coffee beans into a peanut roaster: "It was smoky and dirty."

As a high school student, Lee worked his way from dishwasher to barista to assistant manager. When it came time to choose a college, he went away "far away" to the University of Alaska.

Lee escaped from San Diego, but not his destiny. To make ends meet as an undergrad, he worked in a Fairbanks coffee house. He eventually returned to Southern California and the Pannikin. In 1998, he and his wife, Kimberly, bought the chain's coffee roasting division, Cafe Moto.

Moto "the name comes from the family's passion for motorcycles" turns out 8,000 to 10,000 pounds a week. Its natural gas-fired roaster, a Jabez Burns Jubilee, is a 60-year-old workhorse capable of toasting 264-pound batches. Each requires 11 to 20 minutes in the roaster, depending on the coffee's darkness, and

another two or three minutes to cool.

San Diego is no Seattle, and the economy, here as across the nation, is colder than iced mocha. But Lee doesn't see any decline in his business, which focuses on selling to restaurants, coffeehouses and markets.

"We still have new clients coming in," he said.

Demand is also up at Caffe Calabria, where the 1956 roaster handles 6,000 pounds a week.

That figure is pre-roast. The heat sucks moisture from the green beans, which lose up to 20 percent of their weight. Shrinkage continues after the beans cool, when they pass through the "de-stoner" pan, where staffers pluck out debris that was packed in the raw beans' burlap sacks.

Caffe Calabria has found stones, nails, wires, a light bulb's metal base. Once they found a cell phone. Everyone plucks out shriveled or rotten beans, and brass shell casings are common. At San Diego's Bird Rock Roasters, proprietor Chuck Patton once fished from his de-stoner one well-done reptile. Lizard Latte, anyone?

These are all "defects," and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration allows a certain amount of flaws in unprocessed coffee. The specialty-grade coffee turned out by roasters has to meet a higher standard, but not every retailer is so conscientious.

"The stuff in the grocery bins is six months old!" insisted home-roast apostle Behm. "People don't know what they are getting!"

BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL

People do, though, have strong opinions about their coffee. They favor one brand or roast, or coffee filter, or coffee maker over another. They seek and they find.

Usually. In 1991, Arne Holt left Seattle for San Diego. He loved the local climate, loved the local lifestyle, hated the local brew.

"I tried to find a good latte. Nonexistent."

Holt's uncle built a coffee cart that became a fixture at a local hospital. There, and now as Caffe Calabria's owner, Holt could produce coffees that meet his criteria.

But a great cup is as personal, and as tough to define, as a great kiss. Your mouth recognizes it, certainly, but can words capture this transcendent experience?

Maybe. Just don't use "cream" or "sugar."

When customers add anything to a fine coffee, roasters cringe like winemakers witnessing some schlub dropping ice cubes into an award-winning cabernet.

"People are used to drinking bad coffee," said Patton, the former English teacher who runs Bird Rock Roasters. "They add the cream and sugar to cover that up."

Peter Rowe writes about food and drink for The San Diego Union-Tribune. Contact him at peter.rowe@uniontrib.com.

Copyright 2009 The San Diego Union-Tribune. Distributed By Creators Syndicate Inc.

Cooking Corner: Producing perfect cup of Joe can be an obsession by Peter Rowe