

The King of Coffee

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By Elena Ferretti

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According to The National Coffee Association, 54% of American adults, roughly 150 million people, drink 3.3 cups of coffee every day. To whom do they owe a debt of gratitude for their daily drink?

Goats.

As one legend goes, a Yemenite mystic saw a group of old goats leaping with “exceptional vitality” after eating a particular berry. The mystic tried the berries and got to feeling frisky, too. In another tale called “Kaldi and The Dancing Goats”, an Arabian goatherd observes gamboling goats, tastes the food they’ve been eating, and starts frolicking, too. Kaldi tells some local monks about his discovery, they take the berries, cook them to create a stimulating brew, and mornings become a lot easier to deal with for everyone from then on.

Horned animals aside, physical evidence suggests that coffee plants were cultivated in Ethiopia as early as the 9th or 10th centuries, exported throughout Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and later to India and Indonesia. The first known coffeehouse appeared in Constantinople in 1475, from where the concept spread across Europe and on to colonial America, where they eventually turned into the Starbucks across the street from you now. Or is it in your building’s lobby?

But of the billions of cups consumed worldwide each year, what makes one better than the other? Is it the coffee bean’s provenance? Harvesting practices? Processing? How it’s roasted? Brewed?

The answer is yes to all of the above says Steve Smith, Master Roaster at Fonté Coffee Roaster in Seattle, Washington. Steve blends and roasts coffee by hand to coax the best flavor out of each and every bean. It requires experience, skill and intuition, but not a degree.

What’s a Master Roaster? “It’s not like a sommelier,” says Smith. “There’s no ‘Academy of Roasting.’ There are no certifiers. In the 90s there were a lot of people throwing money at coffee and at people who may or may not have had experience or interest in coffee. Some of these people called themselves ‘Master Roasters.’ Me? I’m just the ‘coffee guy.’”

Of course, that's like saying Roger Federer is just the "tennis guy." Smith is regarded as one of the most experienced roasters in coffee-crazed Seattle. He roasts and blends beans to order for clients including Wynn Resorts, Four Seasons Hotels, Los Angeles' famous celebrity haunt Chateau Marmont, and top Seattle restaurant Crush.

Smith was one of Starbucks' first employees back in 1979, working with the original three owners. Wanting to pursue a more artisanal approach to roasting, he left in 1991 on the cusp of the coffee boom. A year later, businessman Paul Odom opened Fonté Coffee Roaster to create one-of-a-kind coffees and espressos, and Smith came onboard.

Odom saw a niche in the market, a lack of high-end coffees in the hospitality industry. "We wanted to continue the attention-to-detail and roasting techniques that were done best on a smaller scale," Smith says. "Paul and I figured we could offer a range of high-quality coffees that would be consistent with the experiences that these hotels and restaurants offered to their customers."

In other words, they would offer four-star coffee to four-star hotels and restaurants by creating distinct blends for each client. Two things made Fonté stand out: they shipped the coffee the same day it was roasted and their packaging had a special one-way valve to maintain freshness. By 1997 their wholesale reputation was strong enough to support a thriving online retail business for individual coffee-lovers, as well.

Smith is responsible for sourcing Fonté's coffee beans by working with importers and visiting growing areas. He also holds "coffee cuppings," similar to wine-tastings, and hand-roasts his blends in German-engineered Probat machines.

Smith says there's no trick to roasting coffee, "but there are lots of interpretations. Coffee is a beautiful agricultural product that can express itself if done the proper way. One person's dark roast is another person's not dark enough." He explains that "roasting is the process of creating variable atmospheres for the beans to enhance their flavor. You're not enforcing your will on the bean. You put the coffee beans in a drum, you heat them up, and in doing so you're creating the ideal conditions for a set of chemical reactions."

Custom tastes are still being rediscovered in the US after the country industrialized coffee roasting during WWI to provide it for soldiers, ingraining a relatively bland brew in our culture. At the time, coffee production was mostly about price and convenience, and the brewing method of choice was the percolator coffee pot. Percolators expose coffee to higher temperatures than other brewing methods and re-circulate already brewed coffee through the grounds.

"A percolator is the worst way to make coffee," Smith says. "I'd be hard-pressed to find a worse way to make coffee. As the water turns into coffee it goes through

the coffee grounds again and again and again. It's like saying, 'Hi, I need my coffee ruined before I can enjoy it.'"

You get the impression that he'd rather drink Sanka.

But while most Americans were happy to buy coffee in a can, immigrants were bringing their own blends and brewing methods with them from across the sea. Italian espresso. Cuban coffee. Turkish coffee. French dark roasts. One thing they all have in common is that they were made on-demand. Starbucks was the first to take this concept and run with it.

Fonté's roast-to-order strategy might not be the most efficient way to run a business, but it does let Smith create the best-quality coffees possible, and that's the goal. But he's not just roasting for luxury properties and coffee aficionados anymore. Fonté is taking its product to the streets, albeit on its own terms.

Its first retail space, Fonté Coffee Roaster and Wine Bar, opened this year in Seattle offering coffee, wine, a few beers on tap and food. The elegant, sleekly tranquil setting reflects the company's reputation for high-end hospitality. If the part café, part wine-bar vibe works as it did for me, Odom and Smith may have found yet another niche in the market.

But is it just for coffee connoisseurs?

"No!" says Smith. "I look at it this way. I take my car to my mechanic for a tune up. He can't believe I drive this thing. He says, 'How can you drive this thing? Look at these struts, look at your spark plugs.' I go inside and pour myself a cup of coffee from his carafe. I can't believe he drinks this stuff. I go out and say, 'How can you drink this stuff?'"

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