



smell the coffee

Hong Kong's caffeine culture may still be in its infancy, but that doesn't stop consumers from demanding more from the experience



Coffee trees have several harvests a year; the quality of beans varies even from the same farmland; beans laid out in sunlight to absorb water, ensuring quality in storage; the 'cherries' turning red is a sign that they are nearly ready to be picked.

Coffee culture is still at a green stage in Hong Kong. Even though there are many branches of the big chain cafes nowadays, the usual sight is of customers with their laptop or novels with espresso or cappuccino on the table.

That's not to say that espresso and cappuccino are low class coffee, but they are all too typical. Most cafés provide very few options to customers. "Restaurants had a few choices in the coffee menu five years ago, but now, we are different." Brian Tom, director of Graffeo Coffee Roasting Company, says. "You can see that in cafés everywhere. I anticipated that coffee culture would become hot in Hong Kong."

Tom is not only a director of the company but also a coffee expert. "I love talking about coffee," he admits, and you can sense his great excitement when the subject is broached. "The trend of the coffee industry has spread out now. Many people have begun to recognise and learn how to taste coffee. It is a good thing because I deeply believe that every industry should pass this green stage. Maturity of coffee tasting in Hong Kong will let more people learn more about it," he says, adding, "just like a pyramid, you need more people to acquire the coffee habit first, and then customers with high purchasing power will start to pursue high quality flavour and understand the real significance of tasting coffee, as with wine tasting, where you should know about the wine produce of, say, Latour in Bordeaux, France. More companies will then increase their investment in Hong Kong because it will be a new industry for the future."

All the best coffee beans grow in the belt between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia are the best places, providing adequate rainfall, high altitude land and suitable soil. Tom says the

best beans depend on some flexible elements. The quality can be very different even on the same farmland at the same harvest, as different beans absorb different amounts of sunlight, and the volume of water absorbed also affects the growth of beans. He emphasises the importance of natural growth without chemical pesticides.

Coffee trees have several harvest times. Flowers and fruits (also known as the cherry) in different stages of maturity coexist. They first grow green, then turn yellow and red, and finally deep red. If the fruit

All the best coffee beans grow in the belt between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, in Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil...

is too mature, the beans will become rotten inside. If not mature enough, the beans which are harvested will not change their appearance. Experienced farmers often return to the same tree several times to collect the best beans by hand. Despite great efforts, they are sometimes only able to collect a couple of pounds from one tree. However, most coffee farmers prefer to use another way to collect the beans to save time, by shaking the coffee trees and letting the beans fall to the ground. However, that can injure the fruit, lower the quality and harm the trees, which may take more than two years to recover. It is for this reason that the best coffee beans are so rare.

About 70 per cent of coffee produced is the variety known as Arabica. The coffee trees are located at an average altitude of 1,150m at a stable temperature (of 15-25°C with annual temperature difference



of only about 10°C), which constitutes the perfect environment and climate for Arabica coffee production. The dry season during the harvest also makes the aforementioned regions ideal for the best Arabica coffees. The plantation system in the best coffee farmlands guarantees the quality of the harvest. The farmers settle in several areas which are divided into smaller farms and further subdivided into blocks called 'quadras', each of which is planted with a specific coffee variety. This method ensures accurate monitoring and constant traceability of each quadra's history of rainfall measurements, cultivation procedures and productivity.

All beans plucked from the trees are green in colour and must be roasted before grinding. Even the best coffee contains a mix of beans. Either by hand or mechanically, the beans are separated before grinding to ensure the high quality. First, the appearance should be checked; the best beans must be the same size, and any deformed beans should be removed. Lime-coloured, bright green and beans with no spots are signs of high quality, which is related to the altitude of the farmlands. In general, beans growing at high altitude and in winter are relatively dark green. Partially light green coffee beans usually come from farmland at low altitude and during spring. Finally, if the beans are superior, you can smell the aroma and earthy flavour. But it is important to pay attention to odd flavours, usually caused by improper storage.

Many consumers feel that the flavour of coffee is not very good in chain cafés. This is down to the quality of beans and the process of roasting, which is a very complicated process. In fact, the roasting of beans is very important. Different kinds of coffee beans should be roasted for different lengths of time. Broadly speaking, less roasting time allows unpleasant flavours to remain, where you can taste the texture and highlighted acidity. Beans roasted for a long time taste mild and soft, the texture



It is not recommended to add milk and sugar when tasting coffee.

becomes thick and sweet flavours are emphasised. Therefore, the roasting time depends on the character of the beans. For example, Blue Mountain can release both fruity and sharp flavours only when roasted for short periods.

Blue Mountain is a well known high grade coffee produced in Jamaica. But on the menu in Caprice restaurant in the Four Seasons there is a cup of coffee that is even better than Blue Mountain: Kopi Luwak. Like espresso, it can be drunk in a mouthful, but it is the most expensive coffee in Hong Kong (HK\$220 a cup).



You can drink a cup of Kopi Luwak, which costs HK\$220 a go, in one mouthful.



Cat got the cream: a cup of Kopi Luwak raises a smile from Caprice manager Jeremy Evrard.

In the Indonesian language, *kopi* means coffee and *luwak* is the name given to the palm civet cat. The reason why it is so expensive is scarce production: only about 230kg are made each year, costing about US\$1,000 (HK\$7,800) per kilo, which is mainly sold in Japan and the US.

The production process of Kopi Luwak is highly unique, since these coffee berries pass through the digestive tract of the civet cat! This is a wild cat of the genus *Paradoxurus Hermaphroditus* and is indigenous to Indonesia. It has high olfactory sensitivity and likes to eat mature and fruity berries. However, the inner beans of the berries are too hard to digest and they come out in its droppings. The enzymes in the civet cat's digestive system break down the protein that makes coffee bitter-tasting. A quick, high temperature roasting kills off germs while keeping the flavours developed via the civet cat.

There is a machine in Caprice especially for brewing Kopi Luwak, and each pack of this coffee has a certificate with a brief description of it, plus an indi-

“Too high a temperature burns the beans; it releases a great aroma in a very short time but it destroys the nature of the coffee.”

cation of the number of packs produced. Caprice manager Jeremy Evrard, places the coffee paper pack into the machine, and the mellow aroma takes over the whole restaurant. “Generally, you can taste Blue Mountain (HK\$120 per cup) because it gives you a ‘wow’ feeling!” he exclaims, adding, “Blue Mountain has a strong character; it should make you wake up in the morning. But most customers like Kopi Luwak; it isn’t bitter because the protein in the beans have fully decomposed. It has a relatively mild and soft, rich aroma, with an unforgettable aftertaste.”

Actually, the aftertaste lasts longer on the tongue. It leaves a little bit of a sour flavour but also has a medium sweet flavour and rich taste. Although other

species of cat and other animals eat the same variety of beans, the flavour of the coffee beans produced is also different, and Kopi Luwak is definitely top of the range.

"You can taste Kopi Luwak any time, before or after meals," says Evrard, who enjoys munching on chocolate and cookies while tasting the coffee. But he advises, "Actually, you should drink pure water to clean your palette so that you can taste the full flavour. The brewing water is also an important element." He shows a bottle of material water named 'Wattwiller' and says, "We use this kind of water – which includes calcium, sodium and other materials – in the coffee machine to ensure it doesn't affect the quality and releases all the flavour in the beans."

The water temperature also affects the quality of coffee. "Too high a temperature will burn the beans, it releases a great aroma in a very short time but it will destroy the nature of the beans. So 70°C is suitable for brewing the coffee, especially for Kopi Luwak," Tony Kok, assistant manager of Caprice, explains.

Actually, people should choose what they like; the price shouldn't be the main reason for choosing a coffee. It's meaningless to taste the 'best' coffee which is not suitable for the drinker. As Brian Tom says, "Personally Kopi Luwak is not my favourite because I like a sweet, chocolatey taste." He travels to different countries and brings the beans directly to Hong Kong, so they are fresh and aromatic. He shows the different kind of beans in his workshop, including La Minita Tarazu from Costa Rica.

La Minita are grown between 1,200-2,000m feet above sea level. Those farmlands produce about 500,000kg of green coffee but only 130,000kg is selected for mill classifications and packed for shipment. The process takes about 30,000 man hours of hand selection. They have a sweet aroma, great acidity and are full-bodied with a good, clean aftertaste, and reminiscent of a fine milk chocolate truffle.

The COE (Cup of Excellence) award chooses the best coffee every year. The COE is the most esteemed award given out for top coffee, and the selected coffees are chosen by several international 'cuppers' – experts who evaluate the specific characteristics of different coffee beans – and they are cupped at least five different times during the competition process. Under strict requirements and testing, the final winners are awarded the prestigious Cup of Excellence. These coffees have also been sold to the highest bidder during an Internet auction. Interested customers can browse their website to discover where to find the best coffee this year. 🏠



Graffeo's Brian Tom demonstrates 'cupping', which evaluates the specific characteristics of particular coffee beans.