

NATION'S
Restaurant News
 WWW.NRN.COM

AUGUST 19, 2013

A PENTON® PUBLICATION

FOOD & BEVERAGE

Premium percolation

Independents increasingly warm to the pour-over method of coffee brewing **BY BRET THORN**

For years, coffee merchants have been working to de-commoditize the United States' favorite hot beverage — to change the daily cup o' Joe into something special worth savoring and spending a little extra money on.

The evolving coffee market of the past two decades, driven in large part by the ubiquitous Starbucks, has created a consumer base willing to spend a little more for what it sees as an elevated cup of coffee — whether for its specialty beans, artisan techniques or dessert-like flourishes.

Today, the Specialty Coffee Association of America estimates annual U.S. retail coffee sales at between \$30 billion and \$32 billion, half of which comes from "specialty coffee," which is any coffee with a specific origin or distinctive roasting style or brewing method.

The brewing method that is currently the darling of that specialty world is pour-over coffee. Similar to the home-brewing method of pouring boiling water over ground coffee, through a filter and into a cup, professional practitioners of pour over have elevated the simple technique to an art form — to the point that they generally brew the coffee one cup at a time.

The technique is popular primarily with independents and small chains, largely because the labor and time involved — as much as three minutes per cup — can be obstacles both for operators and for impatient customers.

But proponents of the method say it creates a superior brew and is a huge draw for coffee lovers who appreciate the ritual of coffee, many of whom are willing to pay upward of \$5 per cup.

Byard Duncan, communications specialist at Blue Bottle Coffee Co., an 11-unit chain with locations in San Francisco and New York that specializes in pour-over coffee, said many factors determine the quality of

a cup of coffee. In addition to the quality and origin of the beans, the brewing process itself has a huge impact based on how finely the coffee is ground, the coffee-to-water ratio, the temperature of the water and how quickly it's poured through the coffee.

If a coffee is ground too finely, it will be over-extracted and taste bitter. If it's too coarse, it will be under-extracted.

"It's like pouring water through rocks or pouring water through sand," Duncan said. "A nicely balanced cup of coffee is going to have an element of delicacy to it, and if you just have a ton of coffee, it's not going to be fully developed."

Water should be around 200 degrees Fahrenheit, he said — not so hot as to scorch the coffee, but hot enough to cause "the chemical reactions that need to happen."

Blue Bottle generally uses around 12 parts water to one part coffee. Baristas start by pouring about two parts of that water onto the grounds in a filter over a cup. They let that "bloom" for 30 to 45 seconds, and then slowly pour the rest of the water on top. The coffee then drips slowly down into the cup.

Much of the process is at the discretion of the barista. The precise grind, water temperature, amount of coffee and brewing speed varies not only from coffee to coffee, but also from day to day based on coffee age and the humidity.

Although many machine-brewing methods can get most of those variables right, Duncan said, "they're often compromises" that don't hit a particular coffee's precise sweet spot. By using the pour-over method, you can control all of it.



Blue Bottle Coffee Co. specializes in pour-over coffee, experimenting with grinds, water temperatures and brewing speeds each morning to find the perfect calibrations for the day.

To make sure they get it right, Blue Bottle baristas make several test cups each morning to find the perfect calibrations for the day's brew.

"Also, it's fun," Duncan said. "Just like any craft, it's something you can get very good at, and it can be very satisfying. It has to do with being able to draw at will the right things out of the coffee, flavor-wise."

Though Blue Bottle's customers seem to have accepted the half-hour waits at many of their locations, most coffee drinkers aren't willing to wait that long, especially in the morning.

Caroline Bell, co-owner of Café Grumpy, which has five locations in New York, said her company, which began using the pour-over method over the course of 2010 and 2011, also brews batches of coffee into air pots in the morning, when people are in a rush.

But during the rest of the day, she said the pour over is both popular and contagious.

"If one person orders it, then other people order it," she said. Farshid Arshid, owner of

"The coffee maintains a brilliant richness," said Rocky, who charges \$11 for a pour-over carafe equivalent to two cups of coffee, or \$4 for a cup of drip coffee.

Considering the cost of the coffee and the labor involved, Rocky makes more of a profit on the drip coffee than the pour over, which he brought down in price from \$12 because he wanted to get more people to try it so they could enjoy the ritual.

"We certainly don't impose these relatively intricate presentations on people who aren't looking for them," he said.

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Umi, a new Japanese restaurant in Atlanta, agreed that ordering pour-over coffee is contagious.

"It has this domino effect," he said. "A lot of Asian restaurants don't sell a lot of coffee, but we actually sell a lot."

As the coffee grounds bloom in the first 45 seconds of the brewing process, "that's the moment when the fragrance that the coffee creates is unparalleled, so there's a bit of self-sale in that," he said.

He added that the aroma as the coffee blooms is one benefit that the pour-over method has over its rival in premium brewing, the French press. The other is the clean taste that pour over tends to provide, as opposed to the thicker, oilier brew that comes from the French press.

Eamon Rocky, general manager of Betony, a new restaurant in New York, likes the oils that come through in a French press, but he and his customers like the pageantry of pour over, so he uses a cloth filter which, once it's seasoned — sort of like a cast-iron skillet — lets the oils flow through.

Neither does Tom Schlesinger-Guidelli, general manager of Island Creek Oyster Bar, a 180-seat restaurant with a robust brunch service near Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox.

He does offer a \$5 pour-over coffee for people who want it, though. The \$3 drip is more profitable, not to mention more practical during brunch, but he said the pour-over method brings out the unique terroir and seasonal qualities of the specialty coffees that he sources. That, in turn, is an extension of the restaurant's food and beverage programs that highlight seafood origins and seasonality, as well as single-origin mezcal and similar spirits.

However, Arshid of Umi said that his \$5-per-cup pour over is about as profitable, or maybe slightly more so, than his \$3-per-cup drip coffee, especially considering that old drip coffee must be thrown away, and with pour-over coffee, since it's made to order, there's no waste. ■

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