

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

January 23, 2008

At Last, a \$20,000 Cup of Coffee

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SAN FRANCISCO

WITH its brass-trimmed halogen heating elements, glass globes and bamboo paddles, the new contraption that is to begin making coffee this week at the Blue Bottle Café here looks like a machine from a Jules Verne novel, a 19th-century vision of the future.

Called a siphon bar, it was imported from Japan at a total cost of more than \$20,000. The cafe has the only halogen-powered model in the United States, and getting it here required years of elliptical discussions with its importer, Jay Egami of the Ueshima Coffee Company.

“If you just want equipment you’re not ready,” Mr. Egami said in an interview. But, he added, James Freeman, the owner of the cafe, is different: “He’s invested time. He’s invested interest. He is ready.”

Professionals have long been willing to pay prices in the five figures for the perfect espresso machine, but the siphon bar does not make espresso. It makes brewed coffee, as does another high-end coffee maker, the \$11,000 Clover, which makes one cup at a time. Together, they signal the resurgence of brewing among the most obsessive coffee enthusiasts.

Could this be the age of brewed coffee? “We’re right there at the threshold,” said George Howell of Terroir Coffee, a retailer of roasted and green beans. “Coffee has never been a noble beverage because the means to perfectly produce it haven’t existed,” said Mr. Howell, who is also a founder of the Cup of Excellence, an annual competition that seeks to identify the best beans in each coffee-producing nation.

But, he said, with recent advances in coffee-making technology, “now you can get perfect extraction.”

Mr. Freeman is not trying to end the era of espresso. He still starts his days with a cappuccino, and his cafe serves drinks mostly from espresso machines, including a lovingly refurbished San Marco from the 1980s. But he’s excited by the possibilities of brewed coffee.

“Siphon coffee is very delicate,” he said. “It’s sweeter and juicier, and the flavors change as the temperature changes. Sometimes it has a texture so light it’s almost moussey.”

A professionwide interest in brewed coffee has driven the stealth spread of the Clover. Introduced less than two years ago, it has become standard equipment at some of the country’s most progressive cafes, including Intelligentsia in Chicago, La Mill in Los Angeles and Caffè Vita in Seattle.

Stumptown, of Portland, Ore., recently installed four Clovers in its location in the Ace Hotel. New York City now has five of the devices, two of them at the Chelsea branch of Café Grumpy, which has used them to dispense 60,000 cups in a little over a year.

So far, the Clover is still something of a cult object, with just over 200 machines scattered around the world. But it might soon become a common sight: Starbucks has just bought two.

Designed by three Stanford graduates, it lets the user program every feature of the brewing process, including temperature, water dose and extraction time. (It even has an Ethernet connection that can feed a complete record of its configurations to a Web database.) Not only is each cup brewed to order, but the way each cup is brewed can be tailored to a particular bean — light or dark roast, acidic or sweet, and so on.

The Clover works something like an inverted French press: coffee grounds go into a brew chamber, hot water shoots in and a powerful piston slowly lifts and plunges a filter, forcing the coffee out through a nozzle in the front. The

final step, when a cake of spent grounds rises majestically to the top, is so titillating to coffee fanatics that one of them posted a clip of it on YouTube.

“There is some gee-whizness to it,” said Doug Zell, a founder of Intelligentsia. “But hopefully the focus goes back to the cup of coffee.”

At the Stumptown Annex in Portland, the focus is entirely on the cup of coffee. As many as 35 different coffees are on the menu at the small cafe, and unlike the six other Stumptown locations, it doesn’t have a single espresso machine.

The Annex first brewed individual cups with cone filters, but now everything is made with a Clover. “You get more of the delicate and floral flavors, the subtle sweetness, the notes of perfume and citrus,” said Duane Sorensen, the owner of Stumptown. “The delicate, pretty, sexy flavors show in a Clover.”

“A Clover gives you greater control over the variables,” Mr. Zell said. “It’s a clean, crisp cup, and it tends to play better to coffees that are higher toned, brighter. Like the coffees of East Africa, or the more intricate coffees of the Americas.”

It is those brighter notes that excite serious coffee drinkers as they take an interest in single-origin, micro-lot and direct-trade beans — those from specific regions, even particular growers, that are prized for their distinctive characteristics.

“Steep coffee in water, and you’re going to taste gradations of flavor you’re simply not going to find in espresso,” said David Arnold, director of culinary technology at the French Culinary Institute in New York. Though he is an espresso partisan, Mr. Arnold allows that brewing highlights the more subtle flavors of single-origin and micro-lot beans. “Especially if it’s roasted fresh,” he said. “The differences are astounding.”

Where the Clover is a workhorse, and its genius is in its programming, brewing coffee with a siphon bar is a fickle art and takes patience to master.

The secret is in how it’s stirred.

A siphon pot has two stacked glass globes, and works a little like a macchinetta, that stove-top gadget wrongly called an espresso maker by generations of graduate students. As water vapor forces water into the upper globe the coffee grounds are stirred by hand with a bamboo paddle. (In Japan, siphon coffee masters carve their own paddles to fit the shape of their palms.)

The goal is to create a deep whirlpool in no more than four turns without touching the glass. Posture is important. So is timing: siphon coffee has a brewing cycle of 45 to 90 seconds.

“The whirlpool, it messes with your mind,” said Mr. Freeman, the owner of the Blue Bottle. “There’s no way to rush it.”

Mr. Freeman said he practiced stirring plain water for months to develop muscle memory before he brewed his first cup of siphon coffee. Even now he starts every day with a five-minute warm-up. The evidence of good technique is in the sediment: the grounds should form a tight dome dotted with small bubbles, the sign of proper extraction.

Mr. Freeman keeps pictures of his domes on his iPhone. “It’s active, sucking out the air and foam,” he said about one of them. “I love the kinetic energy, the aliveness. That’s my best dome.”

Even if the siphon bar turns coffee making into a spectacle, the biggest difference is in the flavor it extracts from prized beans like Gololcha, a dry-processed Ethiopian with long jammy berry notes that turn floral as the coffee cools.

“It’s kaleidoscopic,” Mr. Freeman said. “It’s forcing you to pay attention to every sip, because the next one is going to be different. I feel like when we serve it we’ll have to ask people to just pour it in their cup and smell it for the first minute or so.”