

COFFEE

**A Guide to Buying,
Brewing and Enjoying**

Revised Edition



KENNETH DAVIDS

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Brewing and Enjoying**

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INTRODUCING IT

The information gap; the perfect cup; specialty vs. commercial coffees

WHEN I PRODUCED the first edition of this book in the mid-1970s, finding a bag of freshly roasted specialty coffee was an act of esoteric consumerism often requiring miles of freeway travel and journeys into select corners of certain large American cities. And if you wanted a decent cappuccino, you were in even bigger trouble; you might have to trek halfway across town (or halfway across the country).

Today the yuppie phenomenon, for all of its kiwi-slicing and homemade-purple-pasta affectation, has brought with it a genuine culinary revolution in the United States. And with it, a specialty coffee store (it seems) on every gentrified urban street corner and a cappuccino machine in every restaurant. Furthermore, the latest culinary transformation clearly has sunk deeper than fad and affectation; it has reached even our palates, our sensual being. I find nearly everywhere in my travels around America decent cappuccini where there used to be nothing but whipped-cream pretensions, or waitresses dangling Silex carafes.

To give you a statistic: When I sold my café in Berkeley, it was one of about five or six such establishments in the entire town, and one of

INTRODUCING IT

three putting out a decent cappuccino. Today a newspaper article tells me there are 30 cafés on one side of the University of California campus alone, selling close to 40,000 cups of Italian coffee a day, or 1.2 cups per day, per student, not excluding tea drinkers and puritans.

Blue Mountain syndrome

If the current Europeanizing of American habits is based on the genuine sensual perception of quality, such was not the case even a few years ago. At that time I kept running across the Jamaican Blue Mountain syndrome: well-meaning middle-class families, with no idea what really fine coffee tasted like, buying fancy coffee at \$18 a pound to impress their guests and storing it in their refrigerator for two months, where it went terminally rancid. I also ran across small specialty roasters changing hands and going big time, in the process replacing attention to quality with attention to marketing, and even slipping into shoddy habits like reroasting returned coffees or spraying perfectly decent coffee with oils and flavorings.

*better-educated
consumers*

Today, five years later, there appears to be something of a counter-reaction. Better-educated consumers have led to more responsible retailing practices in the specialty-coffee industry. If there is a falloff in quality today, it is probably happening at the level of the coffee producer and distributor. If you are a grower with a famous coffee on your hands—with Japanese, North Americans, and Germans all bidding for it—you may naturally want to produce more of that coffee; more than is commensurate with maintaining the quality that made it famous in the first place. Or, if you are a wholesaler facing the same demand, you may begin to make discreet substitutes: for instance, lower-priced Ethiopian coffees mixed in with the somewhat similar, but higher-priced Yemen Mocha coffees.

a sensual experience

Nevertheless, the implicit theme of this book is well on its way to prevailing: Coffee is a sensual experience as well as a wake-up pill, and if it is drunk at all it should be drunk well and deliberately; drunk as we drink good wine, rather than swilled half cold out of Styrofoam while we work. And I say terrific; maybe enjoying good coffee won't save the world, but it certainly won't hurt.

There still appears to be something of a knowledge gap, however, a space between consumer aspiration and fulfillment. More and more consumers may know where they're going, but many may still need a little help getting there. This attitude became most clear to me when I was in a large store in Berkeley researching prices on the latest espresso machines. Five years ago there would have been two or three machines on display and passers-by would have asked me what you did with them. Now there were 20 machines on display and I was asked a series of very detailed technical questions by a group of rather well-informed consumers. Their questions revealed that this cross-section of Northern California department-store-browsers knew very well what a good cappuccino should taste like, but were uncertain about what steps to take to produce one at home: They wanted advice on details: about which machine to choose, about frothing milk, and about choosing and grinding espresso coffees. They knew, in other words, what they wanted, but simply needed a little advice about how to achieve it. The same might be said for visitors to specialty coffee stores: Customers are convinced, for instance, that freshly roasted, whole-bean coffees taste better than canned, but still seem tentative on details.

advice on details

This book is addressed to that gap between coffee aspiration and fulfillment, as well as to any casual, nonconverted readers who may doubt that coffee offers a world of pleasure and connoisseurship as rich and interesting as wine, and well worth the same attention. It is not another gift cookbook filled with foreign exclamations and inedible recipes stolen from other cookbooks, recipes that you try once, during the week between Christmas and New Year's. It is a practical book about a small but real pleasure, with real advice about how to buy better coffee, make better coffee, enjoy coffee in more ways, avoid destroying yourself with caffeine while drinking coffee, and, if you care to, talk about coffee with authority. Throughout, I've tried to blend the practical and experimental with the historical and descriptive, and produce a book simultaneously useful in the kitchen and entertaining in the armchair.

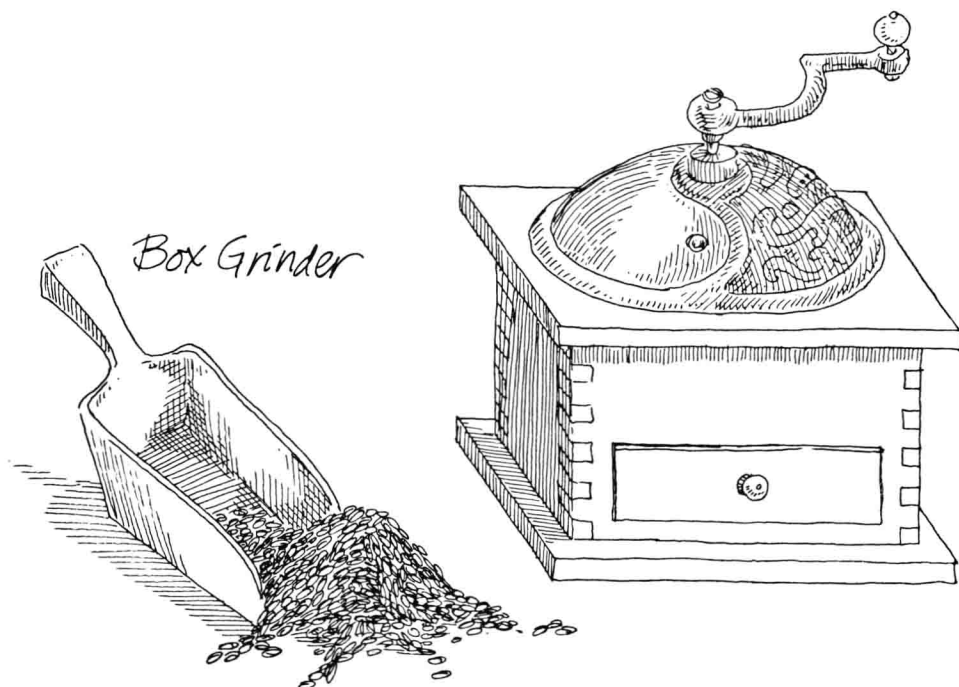
a practical book

INTRODUCING IT

The present relatively high price of coffee is one more reason to approach the drink with love and respect. Coffee is high priced only when compared to cheap tea. A cup of the world's finest coffee, for instance, costs less than the same amount of Coca-Cola and is 10 to 15 times cheaper than a wine of similar distinction.

the perfect cup I used to stay at a little run-down hotel in Ensenada, Mexico, overlooking the harbor. The guests gathered every morning in a big room filled with threadbare carpets and magazine chromos of the Swiss Alps, to sit on broken-down couches, sip the hotel coffee, and look out at the harbor through some sagging French doors.

Nachita, the old woman who ran the hotel, made the coffee herself, from very cheap, black-roasted, sugar-glazed beans. I assume the beans were



the carelessly picked and primitively processed type called “naturals” in the coffee trade, because the coffee had a certain rank bitterness associated with such beans, a taste which is never forgotten. Nachita’s tendency to lightly boil the coffee didn’t help much either. At any rate, by the time the coffee got to us it was dark, muddy, and sourly bitter, with a persistence no amount of sugar could overcome nor Carnation evaporated milk obscure.

By anyone’s standards it was bad coffee. But—you can guess the rest—the morning, the sun on the sea, the chickens in the back yard, the mildewed smell of Nachita’s carpets and the damp smell of old stone walls, the clumsy bilingual conversations, the glorious poems about mornings and Mexico I never put on paper, got mixed up with that sour bitterness and turned it into something more than perfect; I loved it. I even loved the tinny sweetness of the condensed milk. After all, there wasn’t any other cup of coffee, and I was happy.

A cup of coffee is as much a moment caught in the matrix of time and space as it is a beverage; “perfect” cup of coffee to whom and when?

Of course there are certain universals in good coffee making, which run through this book like comforting refrains: good water, good beans properly roasted and freshly ground, careful brewing, and so on, all of which fortunately do not depend on sleazily exotic mornings in Ensenada, and work even at five o’clock on rainy Sundays in Cleveland.

certain universals

There is plentiful indication, for instance, that the steady decline in coffee drinking in the United States (the near three cups a day the average American drank 20 years ago has now shrunk to fewer than two cups) is owing to the widespread use of instant coffees which lack both flavor and aroma. Why else would the consumption of quality coffees be increasing spectacularly, while the consumption of commercial coffees continues to decrease?

Nevertheless, the consumer of the average tasteless, thin-bodied instant may be in for a bit of a surprise when he tastes his first cup of one of the



ARABIAN COFFEE ROASTING

world's great, rich, full-bodied coffees. If one gets used to living in a studio apartment, a mansion may feel a little uncomfortable—for the first week.

Furthermore, the best cup of Middle Eastern-style coffee, say, will taste like a cross between cough syrup and ice-cream topping to an American, while the Middle Easterner would probably use the contents of the American's Chemex to polish the buckles on his camel harness (or the bumper on his European automobile). Even with good coffee, tastes differ.

Coffee drinkers worldwide can be divided by habit and preference into three great traditions: first, the Middle East; second, southern Europe and Latin America; and third, North Americans, northern Europeans, and the rest of the pale-faced, English-speaking world.

Middle Easterners remain closest to basics. They like their coffee roasted dark, generally; grind it to a powder, generally; bring their coffee to a boil several times, always; and produce a small, bittersweet cup heavy with sugar and sediment. The little cups are sipped with a ceremonious air, at all times of the day, and nobody rushes.

The southern European or city-dwelling Latin American has two perfect cups, one for morning and one for afternoon and evening. He always prefers his coffee dark roasted, bitter, almost burned. He usually prefers it from an espresso machine, a big machine that dribbles out small amounts of strong, black, heavy-bodied brew, foamy on top, with a little, not a lot, of sediment in the cup. In the morning he mixes a stiff shot of this stuff with hot milk in a big bowl or tall, wide-mouthed glass, something he can really get his hands around. He wants to warm his palms and fill his nostrils with it, dip his roll in it; if he could, he'd probably take a bath in it. At night or in the afternoon, however, the southern European's perfect cup is as small as the Middle Easterner's, maybe one-fourth the size of his morning bowl, black, but just as strong and sweet.

The perfect cup of English-speaking coffee is at the furthest remove from the Middle Easterner's. First, beans roasted brown, not black, without a trace of the burned, bitter tang of Europe or the Middle East. The beverage

*three
great traditions*

*palm-warming
and nostril-filling*

INTRODUCING IT

must be clear (*no* sediment!), light, smooth, and so delicate milk or even sugar tends to overwhelm any pretense to body or flavor.

The typical North American neither immerses himself in big bowls every morning, nor saves his coffee for after dinner, nor takes quick little sips out of tiny cups with ceremonial deliberation. He drinks the stuff all day out of office urns, or carries a half-filled cup around while doing the housework. And as has often been pointed out, the North American's coffee is his beverage as well as his dessert; he not only finishes meals with it, he's liable to start and middle with it, too.

a fourth tradition

Finally, there is a fourth tradition which is dangerously close to swamping all the other three: dumping a spoonful of brown powder in a Styrofoam cup of hot water and drinking it while walking out the door into the smog. This tradition has of late become well established in all parts of the world. A friend reports that she was unable to find anything except Nescafé in the cafés of Guatemala Antigua, the home of one of the world's finest coffees. The final blow, however, came in Guadalajara, where she ordered a cappuccino and watched in stunned silence as the counterman turned from the gleaming espresso machine to dump a spoonful of brown powder into a cup of foamed milk.

One reason for such a paradox, of course, is the fact that the best Mexican and Central American coffee is bought by the United States whereas the locals can only afford the cheapest grades of local coffee, and may prefer a decent instant instead. But I can't help but feel the reasons are more than economic; I'm sure instant coffee is part of the whole anti-sensual, compulsive work ethic of industrialism, creeping over the world like the shadow of a giant billboard. After all, instant makes for considerably shorter coffee breaks.

At any rate, readers of this book need not feel limited by any tradition. A cup of coffee like any other gesture can be enriched by choice and consciousness. The pages following offer you not the "perfect cup," but the perfect *cups*.

All the coffees I will be advising you to buy are known in the trade as “specialty” coffees. The opposite of specialty is “commercial” coffee. From the consuming end the most immediately noticeable difference between commercial and specialty coffees is packaging: Commercial coffee comes in little bottles of instant, or already ground and packed in a tin. Specialty coffee comes as whole beans, in either one-pound bags or in bulk, and needs to be ground before it’s brewed.

Commercial coffee is usually roasted and packed in large plants, under nationally advertised brand names; specialty coffee is usually roasted in small stores or factories, using traditional methods and technology, and is often sold where it’s roasted.

Specialty coffees offer considerably more choice than commercial coffees; you can buy coffee by the place the bean originated (“Kenya,” “Colombian”); by roast (“French roast,” “Italian roast”); or by blend designed for the time of day, price or flavor. Commercial coffees offer only a very limited selection of blend and roast, and little possibility whatsoever of buying straight, unblended coffees.

Specialty coffees offer more opportunity for the consumer to participate in the creation of his pleasure; commercial coffees are a *fait accompli* in a tin or bag.

The final, most important difference between commercial and specialty coffees is the way they taste and smell. The best commercial blended coffees are good. The worst are atrocious. But bought fresh and brewed correctly, specialty coffees are more than good; they are superb, and superb in a variety of ways. If you want to know how specialty coffees get to be better than commercial coffees, read on. If you take my word for it, skip to Chapter 2.

Coffee buyers divide the world’s coffee production into three main categories: “high-grown mild,” “Brazilian,” and “robusta.”

High-grown mild coffees demand the highest prices on the world

SPECIALTY VS. COMMERCIAL

WHY BUY SPECIALTY

INTRODUCING IT

high-grown mild

market. The coffee tree will not tolerate frost, but will not flourish when temperatures are extremely high either. This means coffee grows best in certain well-watered, mountainous regions of the tropics. High-grown mild coffees, no matter where they come from, are grown at altitudes over 2,000 feet above sea level, usually between 4,000 and 6,000 feet. They are also produced from berries that are picked only when ripe, and prepared with care. The responsible specialty coffee roaster uses only the finest high-grown mild coffees.

“Brazilian”

The use of the term “Brazilian” to describe the next most preferred group of coffees is misleading, since Brazil also produces excellent mild coffees. The trade term “Brazilian,” however, refers to lower-grade coffees which are grown at low altitudes on vast plantations and mass harvested. These coffees at best have a middle-of-the-road, neutral flavor, with a flat aroma. Most decent commercial blends contain large proportions of “Brazilian,” with smaller additions of high-grown milds.

Both “high-grown mild” and “Brazilian” coffees are produced from plants which belong to the botanical species *Coffea arabica*. The arabica is the original coffee plant; it still grows wild in Ethiopia, and was first cultivated in Yemen at the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. *Coffea arabica* was then carried around the world by coffee-hooked devotees, much as European wine grapes spread to form the basis of the world’s wine industry. All specialty coffees come from *Coffea arabica* stock, which still makes up the majority of the world’s production.

robusta

Many other species of coffee tree grow wild in Africa, however, and one, the *Coffea robusta*, has grown to major importance in world markets. The main advantages of the robusta are its resistance to disease, and the fact that it will grow successfully at lower altitudes than *Coffea arabica*. The bean, however, does not have the fragrance or flavor of the best arabica, or even a decent Brazilian, and demands the lowest prices in the world market. Robusta is used as a component in the cheapest American commercial coffees, especially instant coffees.

The coffee bean, like all beans, is a seed; it grows at the heart of a small berry, about the size of the end of your little finger. Before the coffee can be shipped and roasted the bean must be separated from the berry. Nature has been particularly lavish in its protection of the coffee bean, and removing the three sets of skin and one layer of pulp from around the bean is a complex process. If done properly, the coffee looks better, tastes better and demands a higher price.

The worst preparation would be as follows: The coffee berries are stripped—leaves, unripe berries, and all—onto the ground. This mixture is then scooped up, sifted, dried in big piles, and some time later the hardened berry is stripped off the bean. Some beans will be small and deformed, shriveled, or discolored. In poorly prepared coffee all the beans, good and bad, plus a few twigs, a little dirt, and some stones, are shipped together. The various flavor taints associated with cheap coffee—earthiness, mustiness, harshness, and so on—derive from careless picking and drying.

the worst preparation

The best preparation would run like this: The beans are selectively picked as they ripen. The outer skin is immediately scraped loose, exposing the pulp. The beans are then soaked, and the sweet pulp fermented off the bean. More soaking, or more properly washing, follows, before the bean is dried and the last layers of skin, now dry and crumbly, are stripped off the bean. In some cases, the beans are further tumbled and “polished” to improve their appearance.

the best

Coffee is graded according to these three criteria: the quality of the bean (altitude and species), quality of preparation, and size of the bean. A fourth criterion is simply how good the coffee tastes and smells, what coffee people call “cup quality.”

Again: The specialty coffee seller buys only the best grades of coffee, which means high-grown mild beans, excellent preparation, with high cup quality. When you buy from a responsible specialty coffee seller you should be buying top quality, no matter what country of origin or roast you choose.