

What's Brewing

Coffee, Etc.
By Alisa Morkides



Coffee's Third Wave

Jim is a bit of a geek, and his multiple tattoos and piercings are somewhat unsettling to customers. But he knows his espresso. Today, he's mentoring a junior barista, who's pulling practice espresso shots for an upcoming barista competition.

"The crema on that shot is really thin, and the coloration is as blonde as an albino," he says. "The machine temp is a few degrees too high and your tamp wasn't level. Let's adjust these parameters and see how the shot looks."

Although this attention to detail seems beyond the pale—after all, isn't coffee just coffee?—a relentless pursuit of quality in sourcing and brewing is where it's at in the search for the "God Shot"—the perfect shot of espresso. Industry pundits see this as a part of the "third wave" of coffee, where the drink is given the same respect as fine wine and chocolate.

In the first wave, coffee was a commodity beverage, marketed more for its stimulative qualities than for its flavor. In the second wave, Americans began hanging out in coffee shops and drinking espresso. Starbucks did much to expand this market, introducing consumers to new ways of enjoying coffee and raising standards. The third wave completes the evolution of coffee from commodity to connoisseur beverage.

Interestingly, third-wave retailers and baristas believe that most "specialty-grade" coffee isn't necessarily good coffee.

"Most specialty coffee served in coffee shops is over-roasted and inexpertly brewed on automatic machines, which means that you need to add lots of milk and sweeteners to overcome the bitter and sour taste," says industry consultant Andrew Hetzel. "It's like with a charred steak, where you taste the char and not the underlying flavor of the steak. Over-roasted coffee hides the inherent flavors of the coffee."

It doesn't have to be this way. Third-wave coffee retailers are obsessed with raising the espresso bar when it comes to coffee. They pay attention to each step in the process from seed to cup, making sure that quality is not lost along the way.

These retailers either roast their own coffee or partner with smaller artisan roasters who comb the planet to source

top-grade specialty coffees. The beverages they serve must be carefully roasted to bring out the unique flavor of each coffee varietal. Over-roasted beans are a big no-no, as are automatic machines, because they do not give baristas enough control to make superior drinks. Baristas are trained to the highest standards to create hand-crafted beverages using top-of-the-line brewing equipment.

This new breed of retailers place great value on coffee freshness and most will stamp a roast date on each bag they sell, removing from their shelves product that isn't sold within a few weeks to ensure that customers are getting the freshest coffee.

The third-wave movement is gaining national attention; *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications have published stories on the phenomenon in the past few years. But coffee connoisseurs still make up a small percentage of the specialty coffee industry. Most have set up shop in trend-setting East Coast cities such as New York and Washington, D.C., or on the West Coast, particularly in Portland and Seattle.

In the Mid-Atlantic region, a few retailers are stepping up the game and taking coffee to new heights of taste and freshness. Murky Coffee in D.C., Rojo's Roastery in Lambertville, N.J., and Chestnut Hill Coffee in the northern Philadelphia suburbs are worth a visit to sample fresh, high-quality coffee.

The good news: You don't have to engage in third wave geek-speak ("Perfect crema, excellent coloration, fruity undertones") to enjoy a good third-wave coffee. Leave that to the barista with the tattoos.

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