



Coffee Culture

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by Alvin Clay

Deep in the recesses of a Chinese dairy factory, three young Westers huddle intently over the cooling bin of a coffee roasting machine. The furnace roars in the background, so the roasters lean in to hear each other's sell them, feel the oil on their surface, sift them through their hands; carefully weighing whether or not this roast will yield an aromatic brew.

These are the Arabica Coffee Roasters: Americans Ron Thompson and Stuart Eunson, and Australian Richard Wilson. Over the past year the three have done everything from putting plumbing and sheet rock into their factory, to "cupping" (i.e. tasting, under carefully controlled circumstances) their final blends. With its commercial opening this month, Arabica Coffee Roasters is now ready to bring freshly roasted coffee Beijing's coffee lovers.

"Grind freshly roasted. Brew freshly ground. Drink freshly brewed."

This is more than Thompson's recommendation for a great cup of coffee, it's something of a mantra around the shop. Freshness is a fixation for these eager entrepreneurs. "Freshly roasted. After that, it taste's flat, like a Coke that's been out all night compared to one just opened," Eunson instructs.

So that French roast that's been in the freezer for a month and a half? It's old Coke. Drinkable maybe, but not fresh. And if the beans were vacuum packed? Forget it. Before the roaster can seal the vacuum packaging, they have to let the beans aerate and cool down. This is when the beans smell bad, which is actually bad because all that smell was meant to be flavor in your cup.

But can you really taste the difference? Yes. The older coffee tastes a little flat, sour, less lively. And brew with freshly roasted beans, the oils from the beans make a rich, cappuccino-colored foam at the top, called the crema. You won't get this crema with beans that aren't fresh. Other techniques for a great cup of coffee: start with cold water and let it run for a little while (hot water stays in the pipes longer and picks up more particulates). Bring the water to a light boil, boiling too long and hard will remove too much oxygen from the liquid. Brew at optimal extraction temperatures-91 to 96 degrees Celsius. Use about two tablespoons of coffee per serving. Avoid over-extraction by finding the appropriate grind and steeping time-if you use a "French press" coffee maker, grind the coffee coarsely and let it steep for about 3 minutes. And keep everything clean-a build up of oils will taint the flavor of the joe.

If you want to get serious and try a "cupping"- a controlled taste test-do it in the morning when you palate is fresh. Brew several cups exactly the same way. At Arabica, they steep the coffee in each cup and let it settle like loose-leaf tea. Notice the acidity and the flavor comes from and you taste it mostly at the front of your tongue. Body is the thickness or richness of the brew. Both acidity and body are defining

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Page 2

qualities, and a roaster is typically looking to create a nice balance of the two in a blend. Ethiopian and Kona (Hawaii) coffees are good examples of highly acidic coffees with light body. Sumatran is a classic example of a fullbodied, low-acid bean.

In addition to freshness, the key feature of Arabica's coffee is that they buy only the finest beans. For now their beans are all imported from Yunnan Province in their mix, but for now it still doesn't meet their standards for quality, primarily because the processing is inconsistent. This kind of quality has its price, though, Y80 for 250g to be price, Arabica Roasters will roast to your door city-wide. If you prefer to order more beans at once, they will give a volume discount, and still deliver the beans in quantities as small as 250g so that you always have freshly roasted beans on hand.

About half of the cost, Thompson explains, is comprised of duties on imported beans, so when Arabica does find a Yunnan coffee that meets their standards for processing, they'll be able to offer more moderately priced blends. Who's going to buy coffee at these prices? Individuals and foreign representative office, mostly, Thompson and company hope. People who appreciate fresh, premium coffee and realize there's just no way to get it here short of leaving the country once a week. The Chinese market is small now, but may grow later as it has in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Cafe culture in Beijing? Maybe not yet, but Arabica does see the possibility for branching out into coffee/espresso carts at high traffic areas like deluxe shopping centers. These carts require much less in terms of capital costs than a cafe, and can gradually introduce people to espresso drinks and coffee "on the run." So, will these guys be the "Starbucks in an American retailer of gourmet coffee that is the start-up success story of the 90s). "We'd rather be the next XO," comments Wilson. Arabica want to establish their reputation for premium quality and grow slowly at first, roasting only 25-30kg per day for the next few month. This is in part because their total stock of imported beans is limited and getting a smooth supply of imported beans is tricky.

It takes about 3 months from the time of placing orders with distributors in the US and Australia for beans to reach them in Beijing. Don't worry about freshness, though. Unroasted beans can sit in warehouses and on ships for two to three years with no adverse impact on flavor. In fact, some people prefer their coffee "aged" in this way. In the days when coffee took months to reach Europe by sailing ship, people grew to like the complex, aged flavor of Indian Malabar. When transport by steam ship eliminated this natural weathering process, disappointed customer made the growers figure out ways of re-creating that distinct flavor. Now, the so-called "Monsoon Malabar" beans are deliberately exposed to the weather of the monsoon rains by taking the roof off the plantation storage barns. Arabica, by the way, has Indian Malabar in stock, but their Monsoon Malabar is still on the ship.