


The Exiled King - Filter Coffee

Paul Stack, operations director of Marco Beverage Systems , delivered a seminar on this theme at last month's Caffè Culture exhibition. Now he shares his thoughts with Café Business.



Paul Stack addresses an SCAE event about the King of Coffees

Filter coffee is the king of coffee consumption in the UK and Ireland. Approximately 70 per cent of coffee consumed on these islands is filter brewed. It is also an excellent profit maker. Why then are standards of filter coffee woefully ignored in the marketplace? Why is there not more training? At a guesstimate, around 90 per cent of barista training is devoted to espresso and espresso-based beverages – cappuccinos and lattes, etc.

Why? Many reasons. Certainly, espresso exudes an aura. It conjures up images of brooding latinos in black and white photographs with pouting trophy girlfriends clad in sunglasses and headscarf. Espresso is sexy. By comparison, the cup of filter coffee has got a bad rep. It is probably more aligned with dirty dishwasher than dirty weekends.

Who serves espresso and by default Americano? Baristas are generally young, energetic and passionate about what they do. They are carefree, often single and their craft benefits from their exuberant youth. They generally know very very little about good filter brewing techniques.

Without wanting to be disrespectful, those who serve filter coffee are often neither young nor energetic nor passionate. They do have one thing in common with the young sexy barista – they also know very very little about good filter brewing techniques. So training is a problem. OK – that can be fixed.

To brew good filter coffee there are some core principles. The first and probably most crucial is to use enough coffee. Due to the prevalence of pre-ground packs for filter brewing, there is no longer a barista element to filter brewing. An operator rips open a pack, dumps it in the filter basket and presses go. They have no say in how much coffee is to be used. The accepted quantity for quality coffee is at least 50 grams per litre. Industry competition has dragged us down to as low as 35 grams per litre as the turf war continues in big volume accounts like hotel chains. Coffee companies are chasing each other on price rather than quality to grow turnover.

Inevitably therefore the coffee is watery. What about the flavour? Unfortunately, to get any taste with such a small volume of coffee, the

trend is to over-roast coffees to get as big a bang for your buck as possible. The result - watery and burnt coffee.

So now we have watery and burnt tasting coffee. I'm only just getting started and already the picture is emerging as to why filter coffee gets a bad rep.

Our next problem is the grind. Filter coffee generally requires a medium or even medium to coarse grind. The coffee foodservice has a tendency to use too fine a grind – why – again to get more bang for your buck. Too fine a grind and your brewer will overextract, taking all the bad stuff out of your coffee – bad acids, caffeine and bitterness.

So where are we now – watery, burnt, overextracted bitter coffee. Lovely.

Oh no there's more. 98.5 – 99 per cent of our cup is water. If your water is bad, it's not going to help your coffee. Is your water cloudy, smelly and does it taste nasty? It does! OK then – let's make some coffee with it. You get the picture.

If we manage to convince people to use the right coffee-to-water ratio, use the right grind and good clean fresh water we now have to get them

to use a decent brewer. One that brews at the right temperature (92-96°C), has the right brewing time (4-6 minutes for filter brew) and evenly extracts the right amount of coffee (18-22 per cent). Now that sounds pretty difficult. Not really. Buy the right machine. Get some training and chart your extraction – or get someone to do it for you. At Marco, we use the TDS (totally dissolved solids) meter as used in the recently launched SCAE Gold Cup standard for coffee and championed by the SCAA. Without getting too technical if you measure the amount of coffee dissolved in the cup, you can check if you have extracted the brew correctly. It is also a great objective way to check extraction against taste profiling. Correct extraction defined as between 18 and 22 per cent of the coffee used is being extracted and dissolved in your pot.

So – a lot to do. And the subjects of coffee origins, blends or roasts haven't been broached. If all the other stuff is right – meaning you are brewing correctly – the coffee you use is now down to customer preference. Offer them a single origin Costa Rican Tarrazu and they'll be flocking back for more. Get a Cup of Excellence brewed correctly and you'll have stalkers.

Customers are buying more and more Americanos these days. This is only because they can't get a full-bodied proper cup of filter. Ironically mimicking its origins then - an Americano (watered down espresso) is a makey-uppey drink the Americans conjured up in WWII because they could not get filter coffee in mainland Europe. A correctly brewed fresh, quality cup will beat an Americano any day – and make you more money.

The customer can now have a real choice.

Anybody who cares about quality filter brewed coffee will applaud the efforts of The Coffee Equipment Company from the US. This company has produced a machine which aims to make excellent filter coffee, engage the barista and make filter coffee sexy. Let's dethrone the wicked prince Americano and return that full-bodied cup of filter to its rightful place – proudly on top of the coffee world.