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On The Table #6

Espresso Standards for the New World

Dear cyber reader, Espresso standards? Who needs espresso standards? And who is to say which of the many fine roasters in the United States should step up to the plate and try to establish them?

Isn't it a bit like a culinary fascism, akin to pronouncing only Montana range fed beef thinly sliced and done medium rare as the only steak worth eating?

Well, no it isn't. Right now to the situation with espresso coffee anywhere outside of Italy is like steak being served with no cooking all the way to being served as a charred cinder. So let us try to get caffè espresso into a range from very rare to well done, shall we?

What are the special characteristics of coffee that we are trying to develop with the espresso technology?

We are trying to bring out coffee flavors to their fullest. Coffee flavors, can be roughly categorized as the roast flavor, darker being more like a nutty burnt taste, and the more subtle aromatic compounds that vary with each regional type of bean. These regional beans are known as varietals in our business.

Varietal flavors are too numerous to classify. Literally hundreds of complex, delicate molecular structures that smell so good in a freshly roasted coffee. But, they are unstable compounds that turn bitter when handled improperly. Exposure to air, brewing times too long or short, brewing temperatures too hot or cold, all turn the beautiful aromatic compounds present in fresh roasted coffee become bitter. In the case of espresso, very bitter. Roasting flavors are the more hardy aspect of the flavor profile. A dark roast flavor is more durable. It will survive the process of running too much brewing water through the coffee, or having the temperatures off.

Through the use of pressure during the brewing process we can concentrate these more subtle coffee flavors into a nectar of coffee containing only the finest flavors in the coffee blend while minimizing excess caffeine and acidity. This is the promise of the espresso cuisine. But it is only realized through careful control of all the factors involved in brewing espresso.

At this stage in the development of our budding American espresso culture we frequently are using stale coffee, in dirty espresso equipment and forcing way too much water through coarsely ground coffee in an attempt to make a big cup. Combined, these practices assure that only the crudest aspect of the coffee flavor survives the espresso brewing assault: the degree of roast. When you get an American espresso you can tell maybe if it was a dark or lighter roast. All the subtle and interesting varietal differences are lost in our lack of espresso brewing knowledge.

Adopting Italian standards of espresso brewing, the short slow ristretto pour, keeping the machines clean, using truly fresh coffee just means that all the care that a roaster intends for his coffee can be enjoyed. It creates room for more espresso styles, allows us to experience the complexity and flavor of blending, which is the opposite of limiting the culinary style to a narrow, snobbish interpretation.

We just don't know how to make espresso coffee yet. As we do learn more and apply our knowledge roasters and their fans can have spirited, but warm hearted debates of their roasts and stylistic choices as each strives to be the best.

Before I take the plunge I would like to point out that in the United States we are a big cup people. We do not equate tiny little dollops of crema in tiny little ceramic cups with something we want to buy. That's OK, it is who we are. So to please the Texan in all of us, I propose the double shot as our unit of espresso coffee, to give us a bit bigger cup, but using Italian standards of for extraction volumes and elapsed time for the pour.

Note: I am also offering milk based recipe standards here, and these are more subjective. Give these ratios a try as a starting point in your own Cappuccino, Caffe Latte and Espresso Macchiato as a reference only.)

Caffe Espresso, American single shot (Italian double shot)

Coffee made with pressurized brewing water wherein water pressure is between 8 and 9 bar during brewing, total brewing time is between 18 and 30 seconds, total volume of liquid extracted is between 1 and 3 ounces, using 14 to 18 grams of freshly ground coffee with brewing water temperatures between 196 and 206 degrees Fahrenheit. (Espresso also carries the connotation of something made especially for an individual, to his or her personal preferences. i.e.. The customer waits for the coffee not the coffee waiting for a customer.)

Caffe Espresso Ristretto

Caffè espresso brewed to a volume not to exceed 1 and 3/4 ounces for the American shot. Literally, the restricted pour, restricted to the finest flavors the coffee has to offer with the minimum caffeine and acidity.

Caffè Espresso a Lungo

Caffè Espresso brewed to a volume of up to 3 ounces for the American shot. Literally, the long pull.

Cappuccino

Caffè espresso combined with steamed milk in a ratio of about 5:1 (five parts milk to one part espresso), served in a ceramic bowl shaped cup with a total volume of no more than 7 ounces. The milk may be steamed to a chiffon textured foam in the hands of a master, but it must be of a consistency to blend with the espresso.

Caffè Latte

Caffè espresso combined with steamed milk in a ratio of 6:1 or greater. Generally served in a 12 ounce cup.

Espresso Macchiato

Espresso combined with steamed milk in a ratio of about 1:1 with the milk added to the espresso to form a white mark on the brown espresso crema. Literally, espresso marked with milk.

Ciao for now!

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