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On The Table #10

Espresso Blending: The Robusta Effect

Dear cyber reader, Four years ago I sat down with an Italian Roaster named Andrej Tricci for a chat about espresso blending. He was friendly and outgoing with his information and soon we drifted to the subject of my interest: Robusta coffees.



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Robusta is the low altitude cousin of the more refined *coffea arabica*, and as the name implies it is more robust, cheaper and easier to grow. In the past it has garnered a bad reputation as an inferior tasting coffee, mostly found in vacuum packed cans bearing the name of large food processing companies located between dog food and styrofoam cups in every grocery store in America. And, it has deserved it's reputation.

However, I knew from my trips to Italy in 1989 that almost all Italian espresso blends relied on Robusta to enhance the crema. To my palette, most Italian espresso I encountered did indeed taste oily and winy from the addition of inferior robustas in the blend. So I asked Signor Tricci what gives?

He explained that Italian gourmet roasters devote most of their time and energy to searching out fine robustas to add to their blend. Coffees that will give them the longer lasting crema and at best will not detract from the flavor of the finer arabicas in the blend. Once located, Tricci explained to me, Italian roasters jealously guarded the source of their robustas from the competition. It was as if the robusta chosen was the most important part of their unique blend.

I believed him.

Thus began my search for a mild inoffensive robusta. Well, last year, I located an "estate robusta", hand cultivated, washed, and graded with all the care of a fine arabica. And, surprise, surprise, just as expensive. To my astonishment it was as fine a single bean coffee as I have ever tasted, mild and sweet with a rich earthy caramel tone that I just crave in my blends.

And crema...pearly gobs of red brown crema. Upon sampling this years crop yesterday in our espresso machine, the crema overwhelmed the double-spouts ability to deliver espresso into a cup, and begins oozing out the middle and both ends of the metal channel. For an espresso lover it was something to see.

OK. So how does it affect the blend? We use it at 14% of our blend with three other top-shelf arabica coffees, mild and sweet with very low "acidity". Thus the blend is 86% arabica and 14% robusta.

It is an indispensable element in Vivace espresso blends at this point. I would not dream of blending without this particular bean after finding it. Crema lasts up to two minutes in the cup after brewing and my espresso features a more velvety mouth feel.

What is the importance of making the crema last longer? In espresso the tight foam, the crema, serves to trap lighter, aromatic flavors within a microscopic world of bubbles. The finer flavors of the straight espresso are degraded and released into the atmosphere once the crema is gone. Think of robusta and its crema as structural to a fine espresso blend.

Ciao for now!

END

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