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On The Table #15

Espresso Coffee: The Denver Effect

Water boils at about 203 degrees in the "mile high city," Denver, Colorado. I brew espresso at 203.5 degrees Fahrenheit. Eager to display my program to the giant SCAA trade show, perfection eluded me. Instead I got more experience. (Experience is what you get when you did not get what you expected.)

Once again the tricky coffee tricked me. I built a new machine and counter top for the show. I took my two most powerful coffee magicians, Amy Vanderbeck, and Lisa Parsons to Denver. Then, we promptly fell on our talented faces. As always, the more you learn about espresso the less you find you know.

OK, here's what happened.

The crema of our coffee seemed to be exploding out the spouts. No grind would give us the creamy 25 to 30 second pour that captures the full flavor. In the cup the coffee featured a crema with a lot of big bubbles in it and it collapsed very quickly. I played with temperature and pressure all weekend and the best I could do was to brew at about 200 degrees, dancing around sourness to get the crema to feature less gas. We had discovered the Denver Effect, or the effect of high altitude on the brewing of gourmet espresso.

As the espresso came into contact with the air it out-gassed oxygen violently. The effect on the espresso crema was like a hurricane hitting a wet tissue on a clothesline. It literally shredded the crema before your eyes. And as you know the crema is responsible for holding the aromatic flavors in place long enough to savor them. It is structural to an espresso coffee, not merely for mouth feel although that is pleasing. In addition the crema features a very low surface tension allowing espresso coffee flavors to penetrate in between the taste buds on your tongue, providing espresso's unique long lasting after taste.

I don't have a solution for the Denver Effect. It would appear that super-gourmet espresso exists up to maybe 3,000 feet elevation. Above that you better get a French Press. (Perhaps removing the oxygen from your brewing water before it enters your espresso



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machine would be an option, but that would have a pronounced effect on flavor, I think? What do you think?)

Ciao for now!

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