

THE QUEST BEGINS: ESPRESSO EXODUS

I first met George Sabados at an Australian Coffee and Tea Association meeting where national standards for espresso were being hammered out. After a year and a half of passionate debates, and many cups of espresso later, we finally compromised on a set of guidelines, which have since been adopted nationally by government barista training centers.

Coffee has always enjoyed local variations, and there is no doubt that these guidelines will incite further vigorous debate. There are few hard and fast rules as to what is considered a standard espresso, and this is evident in different parts of the world. Fast-maturing espresso markets such as Sydney or Melbourne, and Seattle or Vancouver in North America, each define the perfect espresso differently. This is true within a single city as well, much like it has been in Sydney for some time (although it may be changing). In my hometown the harbor where the world-famous opera house sits, divides the city in two. On the north side of the harbor, espresso tends to be a bit milder than the full-bodied and powerful Robusta-blend espressos found closer to downtown on the southern side of the harbor. Regardless of where espresso is enjoyed, the indispensable rule is: Always let your taste be your guide.

For centuries, coffee has incited numerous controversies and passionate discussions around the world. I believe that this is healthy as long as it leads to the gathering of wisdom. Unfortunately, wisdom is so elusive because it is one step beyond knowledge. Knowledge comes from learning the information, facts, ideas or principles. Wisdom comes from actively applying knowledge to a practical test. Someone once said that wisdom is 90 percent hindsight. There is a lot of truth to this. Through experience, a person learns the tricks of the trade to avoid common pitfalls, and in the process gains wisdom.

George came from the sensory-inspired European school of espresso, whereas I came from the scientific-based analytical school. This so-called European (or Italian) approach involves more of the senses, whereas the scientific school is more about measuring grams and liquid volumes in

an attempt to try to record the myriad variables involved in creating an espresso. Both of us, however, were united in testing our ideas through practical experiments.

George and I instantly joined forces. I paid for him to fly to Monte Carlo and compete in the inaugural World Barista Championship in 2000. We jumped on the plane together and proceeded to have a lot of fun as we passionately discussed our differing views about espresso. The one thing that united us, in spite of our different approaches, was that we both always let our taste guide us.

Being near the Italian border in Monte Carlo, we came upon many seasoned Italian espresso drinkers. Upon trying my coffee blend at our practice sessions they would refuse to believe that it had been roasted and blended in Australia. They told me it tasted too good, therefore it must be Italian. It was a wonderful compliment. I felt assured they were letting taste be their guide!

The European school of espresso is evident in the old school Italian baristas, who can still be found in large cities around the world, although you may have to go a long way to find one.

Sadly, I have heard reports that the professional barista is in decline in Italy. These good baristas know what an appropriate grind feels like. They know what a good pour looks like. They know how used coffee grinds should

smell. They can tell if the water is too hot, the coffee too stale or too fresh, just by the way the crema looks. Armed with a basic sensory appreciation, they can produce a sublime espresso that beats one prepared by a so-called scientific barista time and again. Unfortunately, these baristas seem to be a dying breed, as they are increasingly replaced by fully automatic machines. Why won't a fully automatic machine produce a more consistent espresso than an imperfect human? We'll touch on that later.

Regardless of which school the barista comes from, in the end, good baristas must be good tasters of coffee. The barista must be able to recognize how variables in brewing affect the flavor in the one place it counts – in the cup. There is no getting away from it. The barista must be able to taste. Otherwise they are merely dressing a window. And the customer will never find what they are looking for in their cup.

The best baristas combine a few common characteristics. They are curious about what they don't understand. They take care to present their coffees with a unique signature style. They understand they are performers and their customers are the audience to whom they project their personality and passion. Always strict and severe with their coffee standards, they communicate this dedication and passion to their audience through their character, as well as through their beverage. They can be