

Hard grind transforms coffee from kettle to high art

Christine Flatley

IT HAS the power to turn grumpy morning-hating beasts into respectable human beings, is a friend to all cramming students, and is a great beverage for bonding.

From the basic espresso to your double skinny soy iced mochaccino with a shot of hazelnut, the humble cup of coffee has come a long way since Australia was first introduced to Nescafe's instant granules in 1947.

Over the years, coffee making has slowly morphed from simply boiling the kettle into something that requires university training in order to operate and clean some of the top-end machines.

Baristas (or coffee artists) have steamed and ground their way to the top of the hospitality food chain and can earn big bucks in some of the more up-market cafes.

The trendy young mother can now order her toddler a babyccino, and there are even courses available through which coffee connoisseurs can perfect their latte foam art.

A recent study showed Aussies aren't prepared to give up a single cup of java a week in order to pump a few extra dollars into savings or superannuation.

Research has shown coffee stimulates the mind and the body, while some medical scientists say it also makes us happy.

Sydney and Melbourne still fight over which city can claim to love its coffee the most, but baby brother Brisbane is hot on their heels.

And with a population growing quickly, it's foreseeable that one day Brisbane might take the title of coffee capital.

Brisbane coffee doyen Dean Merlo

believes the city might have eclipsed its southern counterparts already.

The coffee culture has gone from strength to strength in the Sunshine State since the Merlo family introduced the first espresso machine to Queensland at their Italian restaurant in 1958.

Dean Merlo has been at the forefront of the Queensland coffee industry's growth, but even he couldn't have predicted how quickly the cafe scene would change.

In fact, so poor was the cafe scene in Brisbane in 1996 that when he decided to pursue his passion his friends and family were worried he was "throwing away a perfectly good law career".

"I think it has been a huge boom, I think people's level of sophistication in Queensland has grown a lot," he says.

"In terms of public knowledge on good coffee, I think we're certainly gaining on NSW and Victoria, if we haven't caught them already.

"If you had asked me 10 years ago if I thought this would happen this quickly I would have said 'no'."

Kenton Campbell, CEO of the Gold Coast-based Zarraffa's Coffee, believes the growth relates directly to Queensland's best asset — its weather.

"Now when I think about it though it makes sense, especially when you consider the alfresco side of it," he says.

"Queensland is the perfect place to sit outside and enjoy the weather, and I think a lot of people who have business lunches are adopting that idea and starting to eat more at cafe-type places."

Campbell chose his market well when he decided to ditch his coffee cart in Seattle, Washington — birthplace of megachain Starbucks — and



move to Australia with little more than \$20 and the shirt on his back.

Operating from a warehouse in Southport, Zarraffa's Coffee started in 1996 as a roaster and wholesaler of imported coffee to other cafes in the region.

Within 10 years it has expanded dramatically and now boasts 23 stores in southeast Queensland and Sydney.

Campbell plans to open another 10 stores this year and also has his eyes set on the lucrative market on the north coast of NSW.

Merlo has experienced a similar rise to fame, with the brand attracting a cult following in southeast Queensland.

Coffee is Merlo's passion and he takes great delight in watching other people enjoy the product around which he has based his business.

"There's tons of people who drink instant coffee, sure, but for people who

like that next level of quality, it can become an obsession."

Several coffee distributors now offer various types of coffee appreciation courses, which are similar to wine-tasting sessions, only without the hangover.

Coffee is judged on several criteria and different types have varying acidity, body, strength and aftertaste.

The palate should be cleared between tastes, and the coffee should be consumed black, with no sugar, in order to appreciate the full flavour.

The method of extraction is important, and some coffee lovers lose sleep over their inability to perfect their latte frothing. It's a complicated business for such a simple pleasure, but for many people it can mean the difference between a good day and a bad day.

For coffee lovers, it's not about getting it in an instant, it's about a lifetime of pleasure.

What a cup says about men

Espresso: The man who orders the authentic espresso — a short black — takes life and himself very seriously.

There's no time for fancy adornments such as milk or a dusting of chocolate — he wants to get straight to business.

Latte: The latte guy tends to be a bit softer, like a milky latte. He's a bit of a romantic and is probably still friends with his first girlfriend from high school.

Flat white: Flat white drinkers are straight up — no fuss here. On the downside, they may lack the imagination to be thoughtful and romantic.

Cappuccino or hot chocolate: If he orders these he's probably still a child at heart.

While this is fun and exciting, beware that children need mothers.

Short macchiato: This is the choice for the coffee-savvy young professional.

They are hard-working and fun-loving but be careful of burnout.

Affogato: Those who drink this unique drink — a scoop of vanilla ice cream in a martini glass with a shot of espresso on the side — are always looking for excitement, and may have wandering eyes.

Decaf and skinny milk latte: This man takes pride in his appearance but may appear less manly to a woman than his full-milk-drinking counterpart.