

Coffee: are we finally up to world cup standards?

A boom in specialist coffee houses has led Starbucks to introduce a new drink. Is this the future of British coffee?



Chloe Lambert

I love my country. I love our sense of humour, our pubs, our theatre and I don't even mind our weather. But when I fly back home from a holiday, there's one sight that makes me want to jump into the luggage hold and wait until the plane turns back. That is the brightly lit, maroon colours of a Costa Coffee. It's the beleaguered businessman queuing up to pay £2.50 for a weak, lukewarm "cappuccino" with enough froth to sink the *Titanic*.

Why is Britain's coffee so bad? It's a question that has plagued me ever since I tried my first espresso one morning in a bar in Milan. Sipping at a tiny, pristine, porcelain cup of thick, dark, smooth black liquid, I felt enlivened — and wondered what on earth I'd been drinking all my life.

It only got worse as I travelled more and discovered that it's not just the Italians, the pioneers of great coffee, who beat us hands down. Sip on a café in Barcelona, savour a flat white in Sydney, finish off your kebab in Istanbul with a shot of grainy black Turkish *kahve* ... everyone, it seems, has mastered a culture of fine coffee except us.

The chief culprit for our distinct lack of coffee tradition is tea, which eclipsed coffee and became our national drink when it was introduced here in the 17th century. While our European counterparts developed a taste for the dark, bittersweet mystery of real coffee, we fell in love with instant (invented by an English scientist) and for decades, smiled politely as waiters served up the burnt, the bland, the bitter and the overpriced.

Then came the giants such as Starbucks, which worked in part because with the coffee chains you at least knew what you were going to get. They brought standardisation to a country where coffee was chaotic and unpredictable, and steamed ahead. Coffee consumption went up — we now drink more of it than tea — but we inherited the sweet, milky and frankly enormous hot drinks so loved by Americans.

Now, however, Britain's coffee may finally be taking a new direction. Take a walk through London and you'll see a rash of trendy independent coffee houses, with blackboards boasting of freshly roasted, Fair Trade beans and organic milk. Retail sales at specialist coffee shops reached £1 billion for the first time in 2007 and were almost £1.2 billion in 2008. High street chains such as Costa Coffee, Starbucks and Caffè Nero are also performing well, with 890 new branches of branded coffee shops expected to open before 2012, but they are upping their game to meet our rising expectations.

Jeffrey Young, of the consumer analysts Allegra Strategies, says: "We're seeing a movement to a stronger coffee palate. People say that their Starbucks is not strong enough, that Nero is stronger than their Costa. That's something that no one was talking about ten years ago. There has been a massive revolution in coffee drinking, from drinking instant or filtered in a polystyrene cup a decade ago to espresso-based drinks made from 100 per cent Arabica beans today."

We are also drinking better coffee at home. While instant coffee still holds the bulk of the market, sales of roast and ground coffee for cafetières, percolators and filter machines increased by 65 per cent between 2002 and 2007 and there is growing demand for pod machines such as Nespresso, which serve up cappuccinos and lattes from capsules, too.

“The British are becoming more discerning in their coffee,” says A. J. Kinnell, of Monmouth Coffee in Central London, a small company whose dark, rich macchiatos and intimate oak alcoves have been attracting coffee lovers from across the city for 30 years.

According to Kinnell, the increase in demand for quality coffee is in line with the resurgence of delicatessens and organic cafés serving fresh, hand-made produce. “I can only see things improving more,” she says. “More people are setting up microroasteries where they roast the coffee themselves, unlike the big chains, which use big industrial machines. It’s always better to get coffee from someone who roasts their own beans: these are coffee geeks. It’s the equivalent of going to a village shop and getting a freshly baked loaf compared with getting a white sliced from Costcutter.”

As with wine, over time we have learnt about coffee’s origins and how it is made. Starbucks may be the chardonnay of the Noughties — once considered the height of sophistication, now somewhat falling out of favour.

“We want to enjoy everything at its best,” says Emily Warner, a coffee expert and the manager of Perfect Cup, a consultancy for coffee businesses that trains baristas. “And that’s not how we see Starbucks. Maybe we are rejecting American consumerism and having quality rather than quantity.”

Warner says that there are four vital ingredients for a good cup of coffee: first, a good blend of coffee beans (Arabica beans are slightly more expensive and considered better, but a small amount of Robusta can help to form the highly desirable golden crema on top of the espresso).

Second, the coffee must be ground in the right way. Third, a proper espresso machine is essential — not the so-called “bean-to-cup” machines used at Starbucks, which grind and produce your cup of coffee automatically at the touch of a button.

Finally, and most importantly, is the barista: a good barista knows how to operate the machine to get the good flavour out of the coffee and leave behind the bitter-tasting flavour to hit what is known as the sweet spot. Like a chef, the barista will constantly taste and monitor the coffee that’s coming out.

Clued up on the drink and how it is made, British consumers are seeking out the cafés, stalls and shops with expert baristas who work their magic to brew high quality coffee. Just take a look at the queue each morning on Whitecross Street, near the Barbican in London, for the small stall with no name run by Gwilym Davies, who was named Britain’s best barista at the 2009 national championships.

So is this the end for Starbucks? Not likely. In terms of network sales, the multinational is still the biggest seller of coffee in the UK, and it is all too aware of Britain’s new-found coffee snobbery. Last month Starbucks reopened the first of 100 redesigned branches.

The green and brown, brand-heavy décor has been replaced with wooden ceilings, bookshelves and an authentic look that harks back to the company’s first stores when it started out in Seattle. Each new branch will be honed to the look and atmosphere of its local area.

When I visit the first of the chain’s new branches near Regent Street, the first thing that catches my eye is a long, wooden, chest-height platform next to the glass counters of panninis and brownies. It’s a stand-up espresso bar. Granted, no one is using it on the day I visit (and I even spot a couple of bewildered people standing behind it as though it’s some sort of queueing aid) but it is an exciting vision of how things have changed.

There’s also a new espresso machine. It is still button operated, but on these new models the baristas must set the machine first, allowing them greater control over the shot of coffee produced. The machines sit lower on the counter, allowing the customer to see exactly what’s going in to his or her cup. All baristas have gone through an “espresso excellence” course, and there is a push for “off-menu” coffee. “Make it your own,” say the blackboards.

This week, continuing its campaign of reinvention, Starbucks added the flat white to its menus — the trendy, short drink developed in Australia and New Zealand that everyone seems to be ordering (see *left*).

“We know that people are more interested in coffee,” says the Starbucks barista and “coffee ambassador” Alan Hartney. “It’s fantastic. People are coming in and asking for a French press of a Sumatran blend they like, or for their coffee to be made a little stronger. I love it when they ask for a really complicated drink, such as a venti, skinny, wet latte.”

Starbucks is serving up a greater choice to its new and savvier customers. But does this mean better coffee, or just a hundred more ways to ruin it?

“Starbucks, I think, would like to offer something for everyone, which is not necessarily the right approach if you want to do it well,” says Emily Warner. “In dining out we have come to appreciate simpler menus, fine quality ingredients, cooked fresh by a skilled and creative chef. For me the same principles must apply to coffee to truly appreciate what this wonderful bean has to offer.”

Many independent coffee makers say that Starbucks and its bastardising of Italian coffee, its giant sizes, layers of froth and vanilla syrups, has given Britons a skewed idea of what this drink is all about. Choice, they say, should be replaced by an education in decent espresso. Public Enemy No 1 is the latte.

“Latte is to coffee what Stock, Aitken and Waterman is to music,” says Luciano Franchi, managing director of Caffè Vergnano 1882, a chain of three London coffee shops that has won awards for its quality. “A grown-up should not be drinking that much milk. Unless you understand the ratios of coffee you will never get the product as it should be — a 2oz cup for an espresso, 4oz cup for a cappuccino.”

Caffè Vergnano aims to emulate Italian espresso culture with stand-up counters, retro Elektra Belle Epoque machines, and wines and beers on the menu too. When I meet Franchi at his newest branch in Holborn, the barista brings me a macchiato that explodes in the mouth and coats the tongue, in an elegant white cup with a shot glass of cool water on the side.

Franchi is unequivocal in his disdain for the multinationals such as Starbucks, which, he says, shirk on quality in their quest for profit.

“They’re not giving people what they want, but what they think they want,” he says. “We want to show people how real Italian coffee should be. I think people should start moving away from milk-based coffee.”

Even so, I can’t help but notice that there’s still a caffè latte on his menu — and you can even have it large. Can the independents really change the British palate or is the force of Starbucks too powerful? While the chain reports an encouraging rise in the number of neat espressos it serves, the latte is still by far the most ordered drink.

Perhaps Britain will never match that tiny shot of heaven I savoured one sunny morning in Milan. But raise your cups in honour of our improving taste. At long last, we’re waking up and smelling the coffee.