

## London's latte factor: Who serves the capital's best cup of coffee?

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If there is one thing London's commuters will never give up, it's their morning cup of coffee. Such is the demand for the perfect cup, in fact, that sales of branded coffee are booming.

Recent research by management consultancy firm Allegra Strategies shows that despite the recession, sales of branded coffee grew 12.9 per cent last year - far above the 2.5 per cent increase in turnover for high street retailers overall. Of The London Coffee Guide's Top 100 venues, 14 were opened in 2010.

The perfect environment, then, for the relaunch of Coffee Republic. The coffee chain that went into administration in 2009 reopened last week with a new flagship store on Tottenham Court Road with an interior designed by Conran & Partners.

"London is pushing the rise of artisanal coffee shops across the country and it is this rise of authentic independents that has made the big chains listen - seeing what a coffee shop can be and leading them to change, re-focus and improve," says Anya Gascoine Marco, head of food and beverage insight at Allegra Strategies. "Costa, for example, is pushing quality while Starbucks is refurbishing across the board."

Pret A Manger now only uses organic milk, pre-empting research released last week by Newcastle University that organic milk is 30-40 per cent lower in saturated fats and higher in nutrients, as it comes from mainly grass-fed cows.

Much of the shift is down to Australians and New Zealanders - purveyors of the "flat white" that has taken London by storm. It's no coincidence that cafés making names as some of the best in London such as Kaffeine, Milk Bar and its sister coffee shop Flat White and Allpress are all owned and run by Aussies and Kiwis.

"London is moving away from that Americanisation of coffee with its big, milky, sugary drinks," says New Zealand-born Anita Langlands of Allpress Espresso. "Cups are getting smaller, coffee is becoming more specialised and roastery cafés are making people more aware of the importance of a fresh product."

As [londoncoffeeguide.com](http://londoncoffeeguide.com) launches to help us find the best cafés in town and the city gears up for the first ever London Coffee Festival in April, our panel of tasters try lattes from the big brands (and their competition) in search of the finest cup.



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## COFFEE REPUBLIC

**Story:** First opened in South Molton Street in 1995 by brother and sister team Bobby and Sahar Hashemi. Reopened last Wednesday in Tottenham Court Road after Tariq Affara bought the company from the administrators in 2009.

**Style:** The original concept was to create a New York-style coffee house, but the new Coffee Republic will serve Italian coffee, has interiors designed by Conran & Partners and like Pret will prepare all sandwiches on site.

**Drinking in:** Open only since Wednesday, it's bound to attract workers from the Fitzrovia-based production companies and ad agencies as well as mature students at Birkbeck College.

**In the cup:** A Regular (medium size) latte comes in a 16oz cup with two shots of espresso and made with semi-skimmed milk.

On the side: A chocolate twist (£1.85)

**Latte factor:** It has a strong aroma and rich caramel colour. The texture is smooth with powerful taste and a good bitter kick. A well-rounded cup of coffee and by far the best of the high street brands.

**Get one:** £2.45 for a Regular takeaway latte at 99 Tottenham Court Road, W1, [coffeerepublic.co.uk](http://coffeerepublic.co.uk)

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## PRET A MANGER

**Story:** Opened in London in 1986 by Sinclair Beecham and Julian Metcalfe, who has since founded sushi chain Itsu.

**Style:** Primarily a food outlet, the focus is on freshly made sandwiches, wraps, salads and soups. The colour scheme is red and chrome with high stools, small tables and box-shaped padded seats.

**Drinking in:** A lunch-break crowd of office workers looking for a decent and convenient packeted sandwich.

**In the cup:** Pret's Regular latte contains a double shot of espresso and should be made with Rachel's Organic semi-skimmed milk (although ours was made with skimmed milk, despite not having requested it). Unlike most cafés the alternative to the Regular is not Large but a Strong option - with three shots, still in a 12oz cup. 112 calories.

**On the side:** A free-range egg mayo and roasted tomato breakfast baguette (£1.89) or a pretzel (£1).

**Latte factor:** The use of skimmed milk instead of semi-skimmed mars the drink and the coffee molecules don't sit nicely in the milk. Although rich in colour with a perky and strong bitter taste the texture is watery and thin. Semi-skimmed milk could make all the difference.

**Get one:** £1.99 for a regular takeaway latte from one of the 154 Pret A Manger cafés in London. [pret.com](http://pret.com)

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## CAFFE NERO

**Story:** Started in London in 1997 by American businessman Gerry Ford.

**Style:** Models itself on European coffee houses. Interiors are decked out in wine-coloured woods with flashes of the Nero banner blue.

**Drinking in:** Nostalgic smokers who pop in to remember the time pre-smoking ban when it was the only branded coffee house still allowing you to light up inside, foreign visitors who like the European image, and beleaguered office workers who need a strong yet convenient hit.

**In the cup:** A standard Regular (medium size) latte contains 12oz coffee made with two shots of espresso and semi-skimmed milk. 120 calories.

**On the side:** A panettone classico (£1.65) or one of its fresh pastries (imported from France) such as a cheese twist with Dijon mustard (£1.55).

**Latte factor:** Strong and dark hazelnut-coloured with a vegetal and slightly burnt taste and an acrid scent.

**Get one:** £2.10 for a regular takeaway latte at any of its 170 outlets within the M25.

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## **COSTA**

**Story:** First opened in London in 1971 by Sergio and Bruno Costa at 9 Newport Street.

**Style:** Promotes itself as a proper Italian café and aims to create a warm and "Italian" welcome for its customers. The colour scheme is greyscale and red with red and white wooden chairs and grey sofas.

**Drinking in:** A bit more mature in feel than Starbucks, this is the ubiquitous coffee shop that reaches far into the suburbs and attracts any and every grown-up - no doubt why it holds the largest market share.

**In the cup:** Costa's Medio (medium sized) latte is 16oz. The standard Medio latte is made with a double shot of espresso and full-cream milk. 128 calories.

**On the side:** A granola bar (£1.50) or a banana breakfast loaf (£1.45)

**Latte factor:** The colour of a Werther's Original, the milk heavily outweighs the coffee flavour. It's ultra creamy with the sweet and bitter taste of burnt caramel. Pleasant but mild.

**Get one:** £2.45 for a medio takeaway latte at one of Costa's 212 cafés within the M25. [costa.co.uk](http://costa.co.uk)

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## **STARBUCKS**

**Story:** The first Starbucks opened in Seattle in the Seventies, but it only reached the UK in 1998 - a year after Nero.

**Style:** Aims to feel like your neighbourhood coffee shop. Many have large soft sofas and armchairs to recline in on top of the pale wood-style round tables and chairs and the trademark pine green.

**Drinking in:** Sixth formers, starting out their coffee education with something mild (while taking advantage of the free wifi), and new mothers pushing buggies.

**In the cup:** Like Costa, a standard Grande (medium size) latte contains 16oz of coffee. It contains a double shot of espresso and semi-skimmed milk. 188 calories.

**On the side:** A skinny peach and raspberry muffin (£1.45) or a Fairtrade gluten-free chocolate brownie (£1.45)

**Latte factor:** Coffee for beginners - this is a milky and sweet-tasting latte with very little discernible coffee taste and pale cream in colour.

**Get one:** £2.50 for a grande takeaway latte at one of its 250-odd London cafés. [starbucks.co.uk](http://starbucks.co.uk)

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## **ALLPRESS ESPRESSO**

**Story:** A new kid on the London block, the coffee wholesaler was launched in New Zealand in 1986 by former chef Michael Allpress. The October opening in London was its first in Europe.

**Style:** The focus is on the coffee above all else. The giant roaster is housed on site. It's an airy space with solid wood surfaces and minimalist sleek lines.

**Drinking in:** Trendy Shoreditch designers and television editors.

**In the cup:** A standard latte contains 7oz coffee made with 2oz of coffee and 5oz of full cream milk. It's a smaller but bolder coffee than the high street chains offer.

**On the side:** Some simple toast with jam or marmalade (£3) or a poached egg, green goddess (herb dressing) and Spanish jamon sandwich (£5), all made with locally sourced ingredients (except the jamon).

**Latte factor:** A real coffee-lovers cup - with an ultra strong hit, thick and smooth with a full-bodied and rich flavour.

**Get one:** £2.50 for a standard takeaway or drink-in latte at 58 Redchurch Street, E2, <http://nz.allpressespresso.com>

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*Eat-in prices may vary*