

## Starbucks is banking on our new love affair with top-notch filter coffee to stay ahead of the game

By Anthea Gerrie

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### **DAVID SANDISON**

Special brew: Laurence Winch, Starbucks' coffee ambassador, makes coffee by the 'pour-over' method, using the chain's new porcelain cones

In a smart basement cafe off London's Berkeley Square, a secret ceremony is taking place. Screened from the view of punters sipping their lattes and Flat Whites, coffee master Laurence Winch is brewing up something much more rarefied. He takes beans – grown on a far-flung Indonesian island – which have been aged and cosseted for five years and roasted until the beans pop twice. After grinding them on the spot, he moistens them in a paper-lined ceramic cone with water calibrated at just below boiling point, in order not to scald the grounds.

Then he pours the water over them very slowly, romancing the cone, so to speak, during the four minutes it takes to produce a strong, rich brew that only "early adopters" will ever taste – it will be sold out within the month. "These beans were grown in the back gardens of just 12 farmers," explains Winch. "We bought the whole of their year's harvest and we have no more than three weeks' supply.

"When it's gone, it's gone and we don't know if and when we'll get any more, as the quality of future harvests can never be guaranteed.

"So this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for coffee connoisseurs to taste Aged Sulawesi Kalosi."

Listing rare coffees as one-off specials is still unusual, even for the growing wave of independent coffee shops staking their rep on quality beans of single origin. But we are drinking our limited edition brew in a Starbucks, more commonly associated with frothy concoctions with silly Italian names generally eschewed by coffee snobs.

Perhaps not for much longer. In the month it celebrates its 40th birthday, Starbucks is going back to its roots as a purveyor of fine, whole-bean coffee few consumers know it ever had. "I thought we should prove that Starbucks could deliver an experience on different levels," explains company chairman Howard Schultz of the decision to introduce "rare, small-batch coffees prepared different ways".

The latest method to hit the high street is the pour-over technique requiring special new equipment. Not that Reserve, as the Aged Sulawesi and other limited edition beans that will supersede it are known, will be available in any old Starbucks.

This is a postcode coffee for those who sup in Mayfair, Knightsbridge, Covent Garden, Islington and Hampstead, or in Manchester, Glasgow, Bristol and Dublin... places Winch, Starbucks' UK ambassador, says are known centres of the new, artisanal coffee culture.

The coffee will also be served in the Champagne Bar in Selfridges, and surprisingly, perhaps, by top London chef (and Independent columnist) Mark Hix, who confesses: "I was initially sceptical about serving a Starbucks coffee in my restaurant, but I have to admit I'm impressed. You can't fault what they've achieved – coffee cultivated in a volcano crater, five-year-old vintage beans and behind each bean there's a farmer, a region, a unique story to tell."

Yet while being sharply on-trend, Starbucks is merely bringing to the masses a coffee revolution which has quietly been sweeping Britain via what Stephen Hurst, head of gourmet coffee merchants Mercanta, calls "40 really good cafes in London, Bristol, Brighton, plus a few places up north".

Many of these already have their own ceramic cones: "Pour-over has been known for three or four years at the artisanal end of the market, but only begun to be talked about seriously in the past year," says Jeffrey Young, MD of research consultancy Allegra Strategies.

"The method has been championed by the baristas who believe making individually filtered coffee by the cup is the best and purest way to bring out its individual flavours." And their

customers are getting fired up about exactly where their coffee comes from: "Consumers are increasingly understanding that coffee is affected by where it is grown as much as how it's roasted," says Chris Haddy, food service controller at Fairtrade coffee suppliers Cafedirect.

But a decent coffee palate goes beyond simply being able to tell your Brazilian from your Monsooned Malabar. Hurst believes many can differentiate the nuances of particular growers: "Coffee is becoming de-commodified in the same way as fine olive oil, wine and malt whisky. It is differentiated not only by taste but by rarity and exclusivity. The new big thing is micro-lots – a ton or less of the pick of the harvest from a specific farm."

There is also a reported 20 per cent swing away from espresso, latte and cappuccino towards filter coffee in general, but given how much faster and less labour-intensive it is to turn over Italian-style coffee, the shots and froth are not likely to disappear any time soon.

Although Starbucks' standard Italian blends are not the favourites of British espresso connoisseurs, all credit to Schultz for deciding to serve the new, rare stuff for around the same price (from £2.10) in an effort to get back the company's mojo.

"Coffee has survived, I believe, because of its inherent magic," he ventures. "A coffee cherry is born from some of the most exotic places on Earth and tremendous care must be taken to capture the complex flavours of the beans. By no stretch of the imagination did Starbucks introduce the world to coffee, but I do think it's fair to say that Starbucks exposed many people to coffee's magic. That is what merchants do. We take something ordinary and infuse it with emotion and meaning and then we tell its story over and over and over again."

But to those who say there's nothing new about putting grounds into a filter, Young points out: "On the cutting edge of coffee, it's all about rediscovering old ways to make it, as well as exploring new ones. And it's only just beginning. We could never have imagined how far the craze would go when we predicted the new wave of artisanal coffee-makers. Now we're on to the fourth wave: the science of the growing and the roasting as well as the brewing. It's the coffee equivalent of molecular gastronomy and there's no end to the adventure in sight."

### **Britain's coffee revolution**

Sergio and Bruno Costa started roasting coffee in London's Newport Street in 1971, determined to tap into a nostalgia for the vanished first wave of espresso bars of the Fifties and Sixties. They infiltrated stations, airports and high streets, and they are still Britain's largest coffee-house chain, with nearly 1700 shops.

The Seattle Coffee Company mounted a challenge to Costa, bringing to Britain the cool interior design, slick branding and giant lattes that had made Starbucks so successful in the USA. They paved the way for Starbucks, who established themselves in Britain by buying up all 65 Seattle shops. Before long, a large cup of something strong and frothy with an Italian name had become the essential worker's accessory.

In recent years, the backlash against "chain" coffee has begun, and in response, independent, "artisanal" coffee shops have sprung up to challenge the chains, pioneering the introduction of Antipodean inventions such as macchiatos and Flat Whites – more grown-up and butch than cappuccinos, mochas and lattes.

Independent coffee shops are moving back towards filter coffee, brewing single-origin coffees by the cup. "Pour-over" and "provenance" have become the new buzzwords for coffee connoisseurs. Leading the way are Monmouth Coffee, Caravan and Nude in London, Twoday in Bristol, Artisan in Edinburgh and Kember & Jones in Glasgow.

### **Sleepless in Seattle – the Starbucks story**

In 1971, two teachers and a writer opened a store selling fine, whole-bean coffee they roasted themselves. They named it after Captain Ahab's first mate in Moby Dick

The shop bought coffee direct from growers. A Starbucks still stands at Pike Place Market, where they relocated in 1975.

Howard Schultz, the current chairman, joined the company as sales director in 1983 and tried to persuade the founders to import espresso bar culture to the USA.

The founders eventually sold out to Schultz, who merged it with the espresso-house chain he started the previous year.

Starbucks arrived in the UK in 1998, and two years later started its ethical initiatives including Fairtrade sourcing and African farmer support centres.

After a difficult period when the recession hit, when it closed many of its shops, Starbucks is now seeing profits grow again.

Pour-over is the latest trend the chain has imported from trendy indie cafes, with the added twist of rare, limited-edition beans.