

Specialty coffee is attracting a growing legion of fans

By Susan Bloom

Special to the Asbury Park Press

Decades ago, it started with coffee sold in cans that focused on production, quantity and price.

Then there was the age of Starbucks, which introduced consistency, the advent of espresso-based coffee drinks, and the concept of a better-tasting cup.

By contrast, “welcome to the ‘third wave,’” says Mike Ayars, owner of Turnstile Coffee Roasters in Belmar.

Exploding in cities from Seattle to Syracuse and branching out to the suburbs, “the age of Specialty Coffee takes coffee’s evolution one step further — down to a country, farm or mill as opposed to just a region, and to the concept of quality over price, much like what occurred in the craft beer industry,” he said. “It’s all about the growing, processing, roasting, grinding, brewing and serving methods involved, or the six-stage process that we call ‘Crop to Cup.’”

Amid the burlap sacks of fresh coffee beans imported from exotic locations worldwide that surround him in his shop, Ayars shared some basics on the rapidly-growing specialty coffee industry, which is regulated by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA).

“Specialty coffee beans are grown at roughly one mile-high elevations in the mountains and are primarily sourced from three main regions that form a band around the equator — Latin America (including Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Columbia and Brazil), Africa (including Ethiopia and Kenya), and Indonesia (including Sumatra and Java),” he said.

According to Ayars, Latin American coffee, which typically relies on a ‘washed’ process to remove the beans from their outer coating, has subtle, balanced flavors that hint of fruit and chocolate.

African coffee, which uses either a wet or a dry process, has a light-medium body with more fruitiness and an intense, almost tropical flavor, particularly the distinctive Kenyan varieties.

Indonesian coffee, which relies on a wet-hulled process, has a more earthy, smoky, herbaceous taste — and a heavier body and mouth feel.

Specialty coffee farms

“Growing conditions, soil, air temperatures and other factors all come into account in the specialty coffee industry, which represents the top 1 percent of all the coffee grown in the world,” said Andy Anselmo, who opened his Leonardo-based Jersey Shore Coffee Roasters with brother, Paul, in 2005 in an effort to provide Jerseyans with the coffee they had enjoyed while working on the West Coast.

The shop offers 30 different kinds of coffee from 15 of the most popular coffee-growing areas, including Jamaica and Hawaii.

“In contrast to large, mass-market producers whose beans are typically plantation-grown and machine-picked,” Ayars said, “specialty coffee farms can be as small as 20 trees and the coffee is all hand-picked. The selection process adds to the quality, and how and where all the steps are done affects the flavor as much as anything.”



Mike Ayars, owner of Turnstile Coffee Roasters in Belmar, removes Peruvian coffee beans from the coffee roaster.

TOM SPADER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The truth in pricing

At their shops, both Ayars and Anselmo offer whole-bean coffee by the bag and brewed coffee by the cup at prices that vary based on the quality of the bean.

Surprisingly, Ayars said, “the cost of specialty coffee by the cup isn’t much more than mass-market coffee.”

For example, a 12-ounce cup of brewed coffee at Turnstile runs just \$2, while espresso and espresso-based drinks such as cappuccino, latte and mocha range upward from there.

According to Ayars, however, their taste is in another league. “One of the definitions of specialty coffee is that it has a natural sweetness of its own,” he said, “so you can pass on the sugar and truly enjoy the taste of the coffee.”

Step up your cup

Regardless of how

much or what type of coffee you opt for, Ayars and Anselmo offer the following tips for enhancing the quality of your coffee-drinking experience:

Fresh roast: “Coffee beans can last for months in a dry state, but once you roast coffee, it has about a two-week shelf life before it starts to lose flavor,” Ayars said. “Choose whole-bean coffee that carries a ‘roast’ date rather than a ‘best if used by’ date, and have it ground at the store or grind it at home with a quality grinder.”

Store wisely: Store coffee in a cool, dry place at room temperature for best results. In the refrigerator or freezer, coffee grounds absorb moisture, other flavors and odors, Ayars said.

Pure water: Since coffee is 98 percent water, Ayars recommends using filtered or bottled water when making coffee so that the resultant brew

IF YOU GO

Turnstile Coffee Roasters: 1607 Route 71 in Belmar; 732-894-9012; www.turnstilecoffee.com

Jersey Shore Coffee Roasters: 64 Thompson Ave. in Leonardo; 732-291-0505; www.jerseyshore-coffeeroasters.com.

doesn’t taste of chlorine or other chemicals.

The right ratio: “Use the right amount of coffee to water,” Anselmo advised. “We recommend 2 tablespoons of coffee to 6 ounces of water; too little coffee for the amount of water makes for a bitter cup.”

The heat is on: According to Ayars, water is ideal for making coffee when it reaches a temperature of 195 to 205 degrees.

“Water heated to a rolling boil of 212 degrees starts to lose minerals,” he said, “so get it to just where it boils, then let it sit for 15 seconds, and you should be good to go.”

Keep it clean: Because coffee leaves behind an oily residue that can make subsequent brews taste stale, “keep your equipment clean — it will step up your coffee game significantly,” Ayars said.

Do brew: “In the world of drip-brewed coffee, you can purchase an ACAA-approved drip brewer for around \$170 or a manual pour-over coffee maker for as little as \$26 that can achieve the level of quality of the best café,” Ayars said.

The same is not true of espresso makers, however. “Espresso-based drinks are difficult to replicate at home without expensive equipment and may be best left to enjoy

at a specialty café,” he said.

Savor the experience: “Even in coffee houses in England centuries ago, coffee was a social event,” Anselmo said. “It’s a very enjoyable experience to talk over a good cup of coffee with good friends.”