



# CHANGE IS BREWING

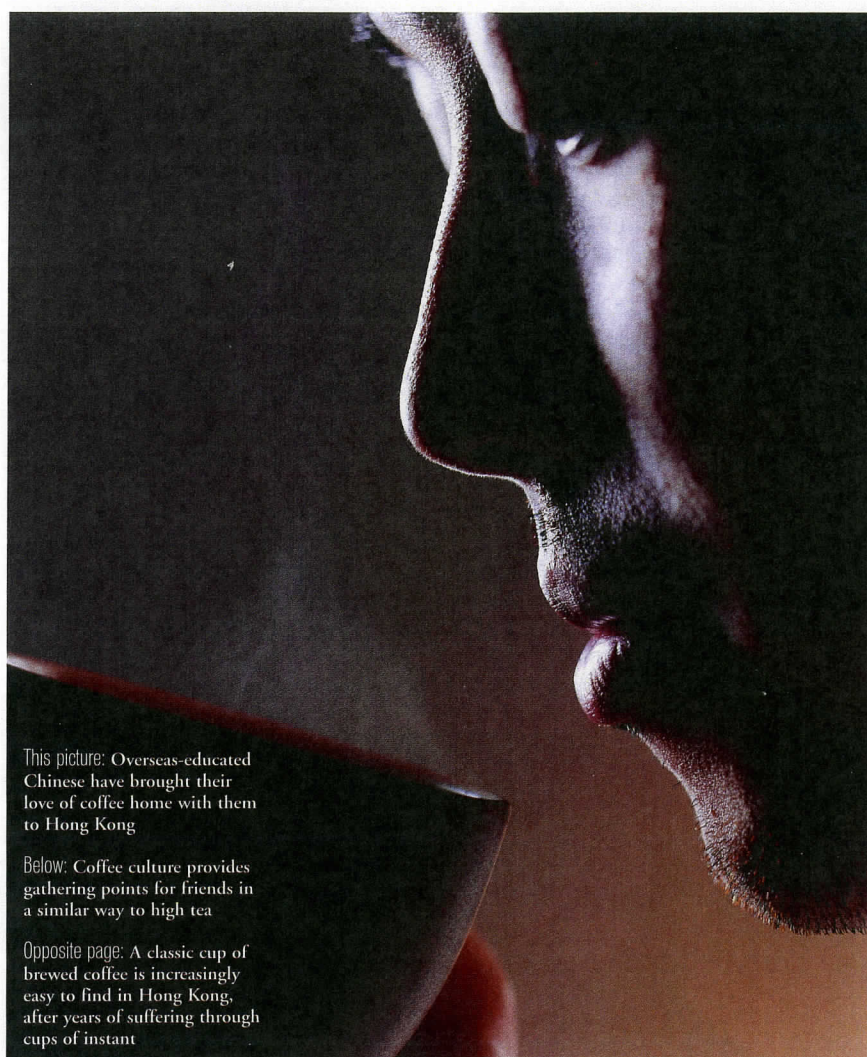
HONG KONG CULTURE IS FOUNDED ON  
TEA DRINKING. BUT IN RECENT YEARS COFFEE  
HAS GAINED GROUND WITH THE CITY'S  
URBAN AFFLUENT. **YASMIN GHahremani**  
EXAMINES THE APPEAL OF THE MAGICAL  
BEAN AND HOW COFFEE CULTURE  
HAS SPREAD



When Pacific Coffee founder Tom Neir tried to open his first shop 10 years ago, the concept was so foreign he couldn't even get a

landlord to lease him space. No wonder. Coffee, as most people in tea-steeped Hong Kong knew it, was an instant beverage consumed at work. "Nescafé was in all the offices," Neir recalls. "Most people thought that coffee came from a jar." Some of the finer hotels served fresh-brewed coffee in their lounges but prices were high and the quality poor. Property owners scoffed at the idea that Neir, a transplanted American, could import Western coffee culture and an appreciation of premium java. "The biggest landlords in town didn't want anything to do with us," Neir says. He approached 30 different landlords before he found one – a man from Japan, the only Asian country where coffee drinking had become widespread – who agreed to lease him shop space. Seven years and 15 shops later, Pacific Coffee finally turned a profit.

Since then, coffee culture has gradually seeped into the public mainstream. It is difficult to gauge the exact amount of coffee consumed in Hong Kong because import figures include products that are re-exported. But a mere look at the number of cafés is telling. Neir's Pacific Coffee chain has expanded to 37 stores and is matched in numbers by US powerhouse Starbucks, which has grown quickly since entering the market three years ago. Numerous small, independent cafes are flourishing too. "If anything's developed over the last 10 years it's been lifestyle," says Neir. "As the market's grown in affluence and education it's developed its own sense of quality of life. And coffee's part of that." Even the economic downturn doesn't seem to have deterred



This picture: Overseas-educated Chinese have brought their love of coffee home with them to Hong Kong

Below: Coffee culture provides gathering points for friends in a similar way to high tea

Opposite page: A classic cup of brewed coffee is increasingly easy to find in Hong Kong, after years of suffering through cups of instant

coffee addicts. At \$14 a cup, gourmet coffee is seen as an affordable luxury. How did a place with 2,000 years of tea drinking tradition become so coffee-crazed?

Hong Kong's internationally minded community led the way. As a former British colony and global finance centre, the SAR has always had an outward-looking view. Many people have travelled or worked overseas, and have returned to Hong Kong with an appreciation for coffee. Neir went after them first, sending letters announcing the opening of Pacific Coffee to business leaders at multinational companies. From there, the news spread to other office workers by word of mouth. But educating consumers is an ongoing process for café owners. "Coffee culture in Hong Kong is extreme," says Martin Lee, executive director of Coffee Concepts, the joint venture between Maxim's

and Starbucks that runs Hong Kong's Starbucks chain. "On the one hand you have a well travelled group in Hong Kong with a strong sense of coffee culture. On the other you have a group in the Chinese community that still does not know much about coffee."

For coffee converts, part of the appeal is the environment in which coffee is often served. Cafés are similar to traditional Chinese teahouses in that they are social gathering places. But the modern coffee shop appeals to a younger, more affluent crowd. Free reading materials, Internet connections, board games, cool music and plush sofas create an inviting, laid-back atmosphere that appeals to a wide range of educated clientele. Business people hold informal meetings alongside university students discussing the meaning of life.

"There are so many things that people do around this product," says Neir. "Talk with ►

## Coffee didn't really take hold with the Chinese population until the 1940s



## "It requires a similar skill set to wine. You need to smell it, you need to taste it"

◀ friends, listen to music, read a book, work out a theory of relativity – whatever." Starbucks calls the environment the "third place" – a comfortable refuge from home and work.

Beyond atmosphere, the product itself is involving. Coffee, like fine wine, is a complex beverage that has developed a following of discerning aficionados. "It requires a similar skill set to wine," says Lee. "You need to smell it, you need to taste it. Like wine, there are different elements such as cinnamon, soil, chocolate or fruits that you can taste or smell in coffee."

Indeed, coffee appreciation is imbued with its own ritual and vocabulary. Connoisseurs have a whole routine for sampling coffee. First they smell the brew; then they taste it using a slurping motion to coat the entire tongue with a spray of the coffee. When they taste, they are trying to determine both the body

and acidity of the drink. Body is the perceived weight or thickness on the tongue. It can range from light to full. Acidity is a pleasant tartness or tanginess. Some experts compare it to dryness in wine. Finally, the taster will note the aftertaste. The fragrance, body, acidity and aftertaste all make up the taste of the coffee.

Several factors influence taste. One is the type of bean and the area in which it was grown, including climate, altitude and weather. There are two main species of coffee cultivated today: Arabica and Robusta. Arabica represents 75 percent of all coffee produced and includes sub-varieties such as Moka, Maragogipe, San Ramon, Columnaris and Bourbon. Arabica beans are lower in caffeine than Robusta, which have a stronger taste and are typically used in blends.

Roasting is even more crucial to the flavour of a coffee. A light roast will be lighter-



bodied and have a more acidic taste, while a very dark roast will have an almost smoky flavour. No matter what the style of roast, roasting the beans correctly is key. "You can totally ruin a bean by roasting it in the wrong way," says Markus Doecke, senior product manager for Miele coffee machines. "For example if you roast it too long the coffee will be bitter. If you roast it too lightly, it might be too light. It's really its own science."

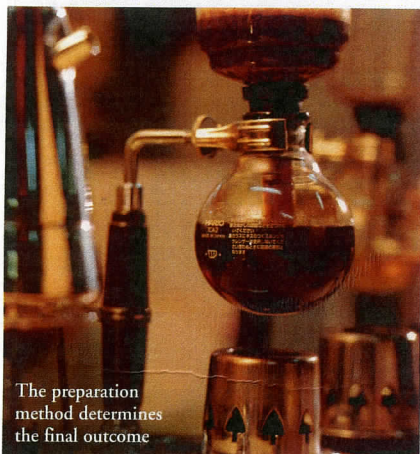
For coffee drinkers, choosing a coffee bean or blend can be half the fun. A lot of the choice is simply about personal taste. Coffee novices may prefer something mild, while seasoned coffee drinkers often like to experiment with more robust varieties. The flavour of light-bodied coffees won't stand up to milk very well so people who like milk in their coffee should stick with heavier-bodied coffees, such as Sumatran. Certain coffees also go better with particular foods. For example, Starbucks acidic Kenya coffee goes well with dishes containing citrus; its bolder Verona blend complements chocolate.

The origins of today's myriad varieties of coffee date back thousands of years. According to Yemeni legend a shepherd first discovered the drink after his goats ate some reddish berries from a bush and became restless. He spoke of the incident to a monk, who later boiled the berries to make a beverage that helped the monks stay awake during extended prayers. They distributed it to monasteries around the world.

Despite the legend, botanical evidence shows that coffee probably originated in central Ethiopia and later made its way to Yemen. The first coffee drink was a highly prized wine distilled from a mixture of coffee, cherries, water and honey. By 1600, Italian traders had helped bring coffee to the West. Pope Vincent III got word that coffee was "the devil's drink," and considered banning Christians from drinking it. But after he tasted a cup he liked it so much that he ▶







The preparation method determines the final outcome

## "Chinese people formed a coffee drink that is strange to Westerners but suits local tastes"

assistant curator at the Flagstaff Museum of Teaware, which is staging an exhibition on *yuanyang* until October. "And they thought milk tea was too simple in taste. So they mixed them together to form a drink that is strange to Westerners but suits local tastes."

Today, those tastes have developed to the point that coffee drinking at home is catching on in Hong Kong. In fact, Miele's high-end coffee machines, which can make espresso, cappuccino and regular coffee, are selling surprisingly well here. Connoisseurs have several recommendations for brewing a good cup of coffee at home. First of all, the beans should be stored in an airtight container. While some experts advocate keeping the beans in the freezer, Starbucks advises customers to store them at room temperature to avoid harmful condensation on the beans.

Secondly, the coffee should be freshly ground. Once ground, coffee quickly loses its flavour through oxidation. In general, the right grind depends on how long the coffee and water will be in contact. A very coarse grind is used for a French press, and a much finer one for an espresso machine. A good grinder is a

worthwhile investment. Poor grinders can heat up the coffee, damaging its flavour.

Finally, the water used to brew the coffee should be filtered and heated to just below boiling. The proportion of coffee to water depends on individual taste, but the basic recipe calls for six to seven grams of ground coffee for each cup. Once the coffee is ready, it should be drunk within 20 minutes.

As appreciation for coffee increases in Hong Kong, the demand for quality is also growing. "If you are a coffee lover it usually means you get into the subject more and more," says Doecke. "You go to Starbucks and look at the displays to learn more about different coffee beans, you learn about different roasting methods. Day by day you acquire more knowledge about it, and that means your desire to make coffee the way you'd like to have it improves." That, in turn, should lead to more high-quality coffee, which could boost the drink's popularity even further. Not that there's much chance of coffee completely replacing tea in Hong Kong culture. But it has certainly come a long way from the days when the only sort of café to be found here was Nescafé.

◀ "baptized" it, declaring, "Coffee is so delicious it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it." Later that century, the Dutch smuggled some seedlings to the Indonesian island of Java, breaking the Arab hold on commercial coffee production.

The drink eventually made its way to Hong Kong with the British. But coffee didn't really take hold with the Chinese population until the 1940s. Even then, it was mixed with milk tea to make a drink called *yuanyang*. "Chinese people found coffee quite strong in taste," explains Grace Kwok,



## LEARNING THE LANGUAGE A LEXICON OF COFFEE LINGO

**ACIDITY:** A pleasant liveliness or snap in coffee, tasted mostly on the tip of the tongue. Characteristic of coffees grown at high altitudes, such as Guatemalan, Costa Rican and Kenyan

**AMERICANO:** A long pour of espresso, made with more water than usual. Also known as Espresso Lungo

**AROMA:** The fragrance of brewed, which varies depending on roast, grind and preparation method

**BODY:** The perceived weight of the coffee on the tongue

**BOUQUET:** The fragrance of ground coffee, unbrewed

**CAFFÈ LATTE:** A serving of espresso with steamed milk. It is typically made with more milk and less froth than cappuccino

**CAFÉ AU LAIT:** French for "coffee and milk," using equal parts of coffee and milk

**CAPPUCCINO:** A drink comprised of one part espresso, one part steamed milk and one part froth

**CAPPUCCINO CHIARO:** Cappuccino made with more milk than usual. Also known as "wet" or "light" cappuccino

**CAPPUCCINO SCURO:** Cappuccino prepared with less milk than usual. Also known as "dry" or "dark" cappuccino

**CREMA:** The dense, golden foam that forms on the top of a fresh shot of espresso

**ESPRESSO:** A small amount of coffee prepared by a pump that forces hot water through fine coffee grounds at high pressure

**ESPRESSO CON PANNA:** Espresso topped with a small amount of whipped cream

**ESPRESSO CORETTO:** Espresso "corrected" with a touch of spirits

**ESPRESSO DOPPIO:** A double shot of espresso

**ESPRESSO MACCHIATO:** Espresso topped with a small amount of steamed milk

**ESPRESSO RISTRETTO:** Concentrated espresso made using about half as much water as usual and a shorter extraction time

**ESPRESSO ROMANO:** Espresso served with a slice of lemon peel on the side

**FRENCH PRESS:** A glass brewing vessel (also known as a plunge pot) in which ground coffee is steeped in water and then pressed to the bottom of the pot by a filter plunger

**MOCHA:** A port from which Yemeni coffees were formerly shipped. Now used to indicate a caffè latte with added chocolate

**SKINNY:** A beverage made with non-fat or skim milk





This picture: The relaxed environments of coffee houses are part of their allure

Below: Various roasting techniques bring out vastly different characteristics in the beans

Opposite left: The global price of coffee is at a 30 year low and growers are scaling back production

Opposite above: As beautiful as holly, coffee beans are a rich, ripe red colour on the vine







# THE GRAINS OF TIME

## A TIMELINE OF COFFEE HISTORY



**PRIOR TO 1000 AD:** Members of the Galla tribe in Ethiopia notice that they get an energy boost when they eat a certain berry, ground up and mixed with animal fat.

**1000 AD:** Arab traders bring coffee back to their homeland and cultivate the plant for the first time on plantations. They also begin to boil the beans, creating a drink they call "qahwa" (literally, that which prevents sleep).

**1453:** Coffee is introduced to Constantinople by Ottoman Turks. The world's first coffee shop, Kiva Han, opens there in 1475. Turkish law makes it legal for a woman to divorce her husband if he fails to provide her with her daily quota of coffee.

**1511:** Khair Beg, the corrupt governor of Mecca, tries to ban coffee for fear that its influence might foster opposition to his rule. The sultan sends word that coffee is sacred and has the governor executed.

**1600:** Coffee, introduced to the West by Italian traders, grabs attention in high places. In Italy, Pope Clement VIII is urged by his advisers to consider that favorite drink of the Ottoman Empire part of the infidel threat. However, he decides to "baptize" it instead, making it an acceptable Christian beverage.

**1607:** Captain John Smith helps to found the colony of Virginia at Jamestown. It's believed that he introduced coffee to North America.

**1645:** First coffeehouse opens in Italy.

**1652:** First coffeehouse opens in England. Coffee houses multiply and become such popular forums for learned – and not-so-learned – discussion that they are dubbed "penny universities" (a penny being the price of a cup of coffee).

**1668:** Coffee replaces beer as New York City's favourite breakfast drink.

**1668:** Edward Lloyd's coffeehouse opens in England and is frequented by merchants and maritime insurance agents. Eventually it becomes Lloyd's of London, the best-known insurance company in the world.

**1672:** First coffeehouse opens in Paris.

**1675:** The Turkish Army surrounds Vienna. Franz Georg Kolschitzky, a Viennese who had lived in Turkey, slips through the enemy lines to lead relief forces to the city. The fleeing Turks leave behind sacks of "dry black fodder" that Kolschitzky recognizes as coffee. He claims it as his reward and opens central Europe's first coffee house. He also establishes the habit of refining the brew by filtering out the grounds, sweetening it, and adding a dash of milk.

**1690:** With a coffee plant smuggled out of the Arab port of Mocha, the Dutch become the first to transport and cultivate coffee commercially, in Ceylon and in their East Indian colony Java, source of the brew's nickname.

**1713:** The Dutch unwittingly provide Louis XIV of France with a coffee bush whose descendants produce the entire Western coffee industry, when in 1723 French naval officer Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu steals a seedling and transports it to Martinique. Within 50 years an official survey records 19 million coffee trees on Martinique. Eventually, 90 percent of the world's coffee spreads from this plant.

**1721:** First coffee house opens in Berlin.

**1727:** The Brazilian coffee industry gets its start when Lieutenant Colonel Francisco de Melo Palheta is sent by government to arbitrate a border dispute between the French and the Dutch colonies in Guiana. Not only does he settle the dispute, but also strikes up a secret liaison with the wife of French Guiana's governor. Although France guarded its New World coffee plantations to prevent cultivation from spreading, the lady said good-bye to Palheta with a bouquet in which she hid cuttings and fertile seeds of coffee.

**1732:** Johann Sebastian Bach composes his Kaffee-Kantate. Partly an ode to coffee and partly a stab at the movement in Germany to prevent women from drinking coffee (it was thought to make them sterile), the cantata includes the aria, "Ah! How sweet coffee tastes! Lovelier than a thousand kisses, sweeter far than muscatel wine! I must have my coffee."

**1773:** The Boston Tea Party makes drinking coffee a patriotic duty in America.

**1775:** Prussia's Frederick the Great tries to block imports of green coffee, as Prussia's wealth is drained. Public outcry changes his mind.

**EARLY 1900s:** In Germany, afternoon coffee becomes a standard occasion. The derogatory term "Kaffee Klatsch" is coined to describe women's gossip at these affairs. Since broadened to mean relaxed conversation in general.

**1900:** Hills Brothers begins packing roast coffee in vacuum tins, spelling the end of the ubiquitous local roasting shops and coffee mills.

**1901:** The first soluble "instant" coffee is invented by Japanese-American chemist Satori Kato of Chicago.

**1903:** In the United States, German coffee importer Ludwig Roselius turns a batch of ruined coffee beans over to researchers, who perfect the process of removing caffeine from the beans without destroying the flavor. He markets it under the brand name "Sanka." Sanka is introduced to the United States in 1923.

**1906:** George Constant Washington, an English chemist living in Guatemala, notices a powdery condensation forming on the spout of his silver coffee carafe. After experimentation, he creates the first mass-produced instant coffee (his brand is called Red E Coffee).

**1938:** Having been asked by Brazil to help find a solution to their coffee surpluses, Nestle company invents freeze-dried coffee. Nestle develops Nescafé and introduces it in Switzerland.

**1946:** In Italy, Achilles Gaggia perfects his espresso machine. Cappuccino is named for the resemblance of its color to the robes of the monks of the Capuchin order.

**1971:** Starbucks opens its first store in Seattle's Pike Place public market, creating a frenzy over fresh-roasted whole bean coffee. ☐