

coffeebar

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I am a bit of a strange person to make this, a photo book about coffee. I go to a coffee shop at least once a day, and yet I do not drink coffee daily and often not at all for large amounts of time. Due to an extremely low caffeine tolerance, when I do have coffee it is usually decaf—something I know to be a controversial point and one I could spend a while debating. Despite all of this, I found myself working at a coffee shop where the customers ask what the single origin espresso of the day is. Throughout the process of learning the ins and outs of coffee and espresso, I found myself developing a deep love for coffee that exists to this day. I dream of a day when I can build my caffeine tolerance back to where it was while I was a barista. At the height I often would drink two coffees a day, a small amount for most, but a feat for me and my over-exaggerated response to large amounts of caffeine.

The true problem of my coffee habit (or lack thereof) lies with the care I learned to put into the coffee and the process of making it. Since working as a barista, I have learned to care too much about the coffee that I am drinking to the point that I am a self-proclaimed picky drinker. I would prefer not to touch the term snob as I try my best not to judge others for their own drink choices. But when it comes to my own consumption, I find it difficult to turn off the preferences I have cultivated through my own coffee journey. When choosing between drinking a poorly made espresso or not drinking coffee at all, I nearly always choose the latter.



One of my favorite aspects of coffee is actually the lack of necessity I have for it. I drink coffee as a choice: when the time is right, when I have the desire for it, when I see the chance for an exceptionally crafted drink. Coffee is a magic. I like to think that if I drank coffee every day, perhaps it would lose some of that mystique. Coffee is a potion I approach with caution, sublime in its power and taste.





Coffee for me has always been
a mostly solitary endeavor.

My favorite and most profound
coffee experiences usually occur
while I am by myself.





When I found the coffee shop empty, I would often make myself a cappuccino and drink it while eating a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie (that we sold at the coffee shop)—the sun shining through the plants and onto the empty chairs. It was a small, quiet place and sometimes many minutes would pass by with no one entering through the door. I would sweep, clean dishes, or endlessly search for the perfect rearrangement of coffee bags on our display. But occasionally, I took a moment to make myself a drink, nearly always a cappuccino: eight ounce cup, a pulled shot of espresso, milk from the milk-tap, frothed to a pasty texture the consistency of wet paint.

I was trained to make “third wave” cappuccinos that depart from the traditional Italian definition and process. Many would call it a flat-white or a small latte. The difference lies in how the milk is frothed. A traditional cappuccino is 1/3 espresso, 1/3 milk, and 1/3 foam. I was taught to do 1/3 espresso and 2/3 milk that is frothed not to create foam, but so that air is incorporated evenly throughout the milk. This is a preference that follows me to this day. To the point that I am never sure what I am going to get when I go into a coffee shop and want to order a “cappuccino” as I see it...whatever that means.





My favorite part was always the first sip of smooth foam, followed by the bite of cookie. I never added sugar because the cookie already paired so sweetly. It was difficult sipping into the heart or rosetta I had so painstakingly worked to create, but there was something satisfying about it. I knew how much care I had deliberately placed into that one cup of coffee. I like to think I put just as much care into the cups of my customers, but the beautiful thing about making your own cappuccino is that you can taste your own work.





Making coffee in my experience was always a messy affair. My hand was never as steady as I thought it was. If not by my own fault, it was the hot water, the steam, the grinder that threw around ground coffee. I would leave work with a dusting of ground coffee beans. I am grateful for the wonderful smell, but mourn the many shoes that were lost by fault of me wearing them to work.

I seemingly never learned to be as careful around the steam wand as I should have. If I did not receive a burn from the espresso machine, it was the kettle for a pour over, or one of the many hot surfaces waiting to unsuspectingly make their mark on my hands. I sometimes think the many burns I received may have lessened the sensitivity my hands have to heat. The danger made me feel less like a one-pot coffee machine that you turn on with a single button. No company would sell a service where you consistently burn your hands.





I loved cultivating for others the magic I feel
in a well-crafted cup of coffee, all in the tiny details:

- Pay attention to the shot as it is being pulled
- Warm the cup beforehand so that the coffee is at the perfect temperature
- Time the entire drink so that the espresso is given to the customer fresh out of the portafilter
- Pour the latte art so that when it is being held in the hand, it faces the drinker

It is the old adage of something being made with love.
Except I like to think it is about something being made with care. I care deeply about the experiences I have in my life. Coffee is a small microcosm of those experiences and a way for me to share that care with others.











The coffee we drink is about the interplay between water and beans. How that bean is ground, how the water interacts with it, the temperature, the pressure, and the time are all factors that go into what type of coffee comes out at the end. Everything in the process comes down to evenly extracting the beans to give as much of their flavor as possible. The more I have learned, the more I know what to look for. Under-extracted beans will taste watery, the water flowing through them without enough time for the flavors to mingle their way into the liquid. Over-extracted beans will taste almost like the shell of a peanut because the beans gave all they had and the fibrous shell that is left starts to impart its own flavor.

For espresso, you are taking water and forcing it at high pressure through the beans. That is why it is more concentrated than other methods. For every coffee there is a sweet spot of an ideal extraction. You work to find that sweet spot by starting at a general guideline and tweaking from there. I was taught with a standard time and water temperature/pressure/volume. You then change the grind as a means to adjust the time and taste. The finer the grind, the harder it will be for water to work its way through the beans, and the longer the overall time to pull the shot. The coarser the grind, the bigger the gaps. It is such a detailed chemistry, all for a drink.

I am grateful I got to learn the many intricacies of coffee. It makes me wonder what other aspects of my life have simply been unexamined. Coffee is both more simple and complex than I ever could have imagined and that is not even touching the many steps it took to reach me as a barista crafting drinks for the patrons of the coffeebar. I am sure if I were to learn to be a cobbler I would look at shoes differently. Coffee reminds me to look deeper and savor more.

“The greatest miracle is that true and genuine miracles seem to us banal everyday occurrences.” — G. E. Lessing



