

THE ARTISTIC BEAN

WORDS
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THE CAFÉ CULTURE TREND HAS BEEN SWEEPING ACROSS
BRITAIN FOR YEARS AND SHOWS NO SIGNS OF ABATING.
MORE THAN A BEVERAGE, COFFEE IS NOW A WAY OF LIFE
AND A WORK OF ART.

It is inhuman to force people who have a genuine medical need for coffee to wait in line behind people who apparently view it as some kind of recreational activity,' says American humour columnist Dave Barry, and he's not alone. According to management consultants Allegra Strategies, Britain's coffee culture is commanding its fair share of imbibers' hearts and wallets. With approximately £6.2 billion turnover in 2013 - a rise of 6.4 per cent year-on-year - coffee is outperforming the British economy.

Allegra predicts the total UK coffee shop market will exceed 20,000 outlets and £8 billion turnover by 2017 - impressive figures for a nation long-obsessed with tea. That's not to say that coffee culture is a new phenomenon. The first coffee house in England opened in Oxford in 1650, followed by London's first caffeine den in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill in 1652. There's now an estimated 16,500 dedicated coffee shops across the country. Cappuccino anyone?

Paul Meikle-Janney, Director of specialty coffee roaster Dark Woods Coffee and Managing Director of barista training and consulting company Coffee Community believes this is only the beginning. 'I think there's still a lot of the general public consuming coffee in the same sort of way they always have. We're only at the start of people's opinions and tastes changing and the whole coffee world developing,' he predicts.





The espresso culture may have been imported from Italy with the first specialty machines back in the 1950s, though it's generally recognised that Australia and New Zealand have had significant influence on Britain's café scene. 'A lot of the best cafés in London were started by Australians and New Zealanders and British people who have perhaps travelled [there],' says Paul, although he notes that Scandinavia and America are also throwing their beans into the ring.

'I'm old enough to remember when most cafés were producing a very poor drink without much knowledge at all. The chains did them a huge favour in bringing in a reasonable standard,' says Paul. 'If you've got a thousand stores you've only got that far because you've standardised, but it's nothing to beat the chains up about. They are what they are, and the others wouldn't be there if it wasn't for them putting that base-level standard in.'

While Paul agrees that there is better coffee out there, he believes the independents also have the chains to thank for bolstering the price of a cup of Joe. 'If you look at what you could charge for tea and coffee 20 years ago, it's about half what you can do now and that's mainly because of the chains,' he says. Paul advocates that the cafés that are pushing the boundaries should be setting their prices higher still. 'They should be asking Michelin-star prices to go with that standard of coffee. You can get some of the world's best coffee for 20p more than you would at the chains. It's a bargain.'

Given that coffee contains no expensive ingredients, the true value is in the skills of the maker. Technology plays a role, though a talented barista can coax a full-bodied coffee from any machine. If it's a latte, that intricate leaf pattern or heart design swirled into the foam is the trademark of proficiency.

Dhan Tamang from Caracoli coffee shop in Winchester is among the best. He has held the title of UK Latte Art Champion two years running and is hoping to continue this winning streak, although he has some stiff competition. 'Win or lose this year, I'm still a barista,' he says philosophically.

Dhan's designs are so detailed that it's hard to believe that they are crafted purely from crema - the thin layer of foam at the top of a cup of espresso - and milk foam. His skill is in free pouring, rather than etching, where tools are used to draw the detail into the foam. 'There's no secret to doing latte art,' he says modestly. 'For this kind of design you just think about what's next and how you can do it better.'

Dhan dabbled in 3D latte art when he first started. 'For 3D, you basically make a lot of milk foam, pour it with a spoon and draw. There's a lot of art in it, but I prefer free pour,' he says. It's Japanese latte artist Kazuki Yamamoto who has elevated the 3D format, with sculpted masterpieces ranging from a giraffe poking its neck through the foam to a kitten leaping from one cup to another - a clever way of upselling two coffees. Though despite its popularity in Asia, in the UK the focus is on free pouring, with no manipulation. 'It's seen as a skill that they'd rather keep practically

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to what is done in coffee houses, rather than playing around with it too much. [3D art] becomes something that is not necessarily drunk, it's something that's looked at,' comments Paul.

Dhan recommends investing in a good barista kit. If you want to win the battle you need to have a good weapon. If you have the right milk and the right jug, then the latte art is there,' he says, although naturally the fundamental principles of coffee-making still apply. 'Really, for latte art there are two key things. The espresso has to be produced well to get good crema because that's what you're going to be drawing on to. That's your canvas,' says Paul. Then there's microfoam. 'That's the dense creamy milk foam. It's got to be that silky smooth melted ice-cream consistency that pours into the crema, creating the contrast. You can be reasonably assured of getting a decent drink if you get latte art because they've got to create this microfoam.'

Paul likens poor quality foam to eating cheap ice cream. 'Cheap ice cream is not cream in the first place and it's been whipped out of all proportion so you're just eating air, whereas, with ice cream you've got that rich, creamy sort of flavour because it's a dense block. It's the same with decent foam - you want tight, tiny balls still drenched in foam that carry that flavour and blend into the coffee rather than sitting like some iceberg on top,' he explains.

With the right crema, silky foam, some basic barista skills and a dash of creativity, almost anyone can be a latte artist. For the rest of us, there's the blooming collection of coffee houses that sell the art.