

# Black, white or an asparagus

Coffee is no longer a black and white issue. **Gail Bell** explores why we are hooked on caffeine

It was dark and delicious, but this was a guilty pleasure and rules were being broken. A cappuccino should just not be consumed in public at 1.30pm according to coffee etiquette – at least in Italy, where it is regarded as a breakfast-only beverage by the cultural elite. After midday, apparently, the connoisseur's drink of choice will always be espresso. If you are one of Ireland's growing number of coffee purists, you will know this already, of course.

But we are not in Rome and it seems that even Mark Anderson – coffee perfectionist of note and partner in award-winning coffee roasters, Ristretto – is not a stickler when it comes to interpretation. In his artisan book, cappuccino can be drunk any time, anywhere – so long as it's a good one.

And, even to my untrained palate, this one was definitely worth the wait. A perfectly balanced, luxurious, three-blend seductive fusion of flavours from beans sourced in Guatemala, India and Brazil.

"Can you taste the 'chocolatey' notes?" he urges, so enthusiastically it seems rude to say no. So, I answer in the affirmative and try to look contemplatively impressed but, to be honest, I just want to savour it without worrying about finding the 'chocolate' layers or anything else lurking in its hidden depths of brilliance. I mean, it's just coffee... isn't it?

Well, no, actually, it isn't. Coffee these days is no longer a black and white issue. It has become more – well, more complicated and infinitely more sophisticated.

There is a hierarchy involved, a burgeoning 'coffee community' is out there with its own website ([www.coffeegeeks.com](http://www.coffeegeeks.com)), the word 'barista' is weaving its way into our language and it seems we all need to get up to speed.

Coffee, a word universally understood like 'Cola' and 'chips' –

and the third most popular drink in the world behind water and tea – has come a long way from when it was first discovered in the ninth century by Ethiopian goat herder Yaldi who, according to legend, noticed his goats 'dancing' after eating what turned out to be coffee beans growing on mountain trees.

It gets us up in the morning, puts a spring in our step in the afternoon and provocatively percolates through our senses at the end of an evening meal.

We get headaches if we don't get enough of it and it is even believed to reduce the risk of some illnesses, including Alzheimer's disease and gout.

But when did we start to take it all so seriously and has it now reached the snobbish levels associated with wine?

"Absolutely, except we don't spit it in a bucket when we do our tastings," says Mark, who along with his business partner Gregg Radcliffe, runs the high-end Ristretto coffee roasting business in Banbridge, Co Down.

He believes Northern Ireland consumers are just starting to catch up and are, at last, demanding to be served good quality coffee.

Having a cup of coffee with Mark is not easy. For a start, the beverage needs to be scrutinised for its

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– MARK ANDERSON

'aroma', 'body' and 'flavours' such as berries or the aforementioned elusive 'chocolate'.

"Yes, it is easy to become too analytical – it comes with the job," he laughs.

"My wife finds it hard going out for coffee with me sometimes. You're never off duty."

He might be in the business, but he also has the passion of a fastidious consumer.

"Our tastes have definitely become more refined and more and more people are catching on to the complex flavours that come with good coffee," he says.

"Years ago, you could hardly buy a decent cup of real coffee and I found that really frustrating, so I bought some raw coffee beans and a little home coffee roaster and started making my own in the garage."

Five years on, Mark sources the beans from 'boutique' coffee farms in coffee-growing countries worldwide, giving each type its own bean 'profile' in a special testing machine before being roasted to perfection and despatched to artisan coffee shops and restaurants all over the country.

"Even as a teenager I was always passionate about coffee, so I'm glad there is now a growing 'coffee community' in Northern Ireland, although there is still some way to go," he adds.

"Here, a barista is looked upon as a minimum wage job, while, in places like Australia, a good barista can earn more than a good chef.

"This is important because the people who make the coffee are a vital link in the chain – there is no point having the best beans and the best equipment if you fall down at the last hurdle.

"Too many cappuccinos, for instance, appear as a frothy white mountain on top, and that is just hot milk, not coffee. If it's made properly, you should be able to taste the coffee from the first sip to the last."



## Brewing up a brand new experience at Clements

A NEW wave of barista competitions is helping give coffee-making the professional image enthusiasts say it deserves.

Self-confessed "coffee geek" Michael McLaughlin, manager of Clements in Belfast's Royal Avenue, is home happy, having finished 15th out of 25 in last month's All-Ireland Barista competition in Dublin.

"The competition was extremely high this year, but that's good; it gives you something to push towards," he says.

"Taking part feels like a cross between doing a driving test and performing on *The X Factor* and it is a nerve-wracking experience.

"I think barista competitions are important because you learn a lot about how coffee gets from the plant to your cup and it helps bring the art of making great coffee to a wider audience.

"Then you go back and pass on that

Michael McLaughlin from Clements talks to **Gail Bell** about bringing the art of making great coffee to a wider audience

knowledge to other members of staff who can, in turn, pass it on to the customer – it is a throwback to the original coffee shops in London in the 16th and 17th centuries which were called 'Penny Universities' because you paid for your coffee and got an education with it." For his 'signature' drink at the competition, Michael used diced pears and crushed juniper berries, infusing them with milk and sugar on a gas hob on stage.

Then he added four espresso shots and served to the judges using port sippers "which meant they could drink from the bottom of the glass

while still getting the aromas of the coffee".

"The point of the signature drink is to take the flavours and aromas present in the espresso, in my case, lavender and red apple, and exaggerate them," he explains.

"I was pleased with the results, but to me there is no such thing as a perfect cup of coffee, as each time I wonder how I can make the next one better.

"There are so many factors which influence what ends up in your cup, including the water pressure in the machine, the grinder you are using, the weight of the coffee in the group



handle, how fast the water runs through the coffee in the handle, the water temperature, the heat of the cup – assuming you are using fresh, top quality beans in the first place. "But the most expensive coffee in

the world – Hacienda la Esmeralda – can be made at home for around £3 a cup and the same can't be said about wine or whiskey.

"Coffee really is an affordable luxury."

Yet, despite all the coffee buzz going on, Michael says response to a new brew bar at Clements has been mixed.

"People are interested in the theatre of it and want to learn, but I think too many still see coffee as a caffeine delivery system rather than an experience to be enjoyed," he says.

"The aim of the brew bar is to give filter coffee the same prestige as that enjoyed by espresso, but in Belfast, at the moment at least, people aren't prepared to wait.

"It has been done with great success in Dublin though, so it is only a matter of time before Belfast follows suit."