

Brew ha ha

For San Diego's small-batch coffee roasters, producing perfect cup of joe is an obsession

By Peter Rowe
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While visiting Costa Rica's cloud forest region, Joe Behm was offered a cup of newly harvested, freshly roasted coffee.

He may never recover.

“It was staggering,” he said, “absolutely mind-blowing how good it was.”

At first, Behm tried managing his new addiction, bringing home to Del Cerro only a modest 15-pound bag. But when his stash ran out, his need did not. He abandoned his career in semiconductors to focus on an all-consuming desire to get his fix.

“I walked away from a nice six-figure job to where I could barely pay the mortgage,” he said.

That was 12 years and one retirement fund ago. Behm is still in thrall to freshly roasted coffee, but today his obsession is paying off. He plowed \$800,000 into sketches, models and finally a product: a personal coffee roaster that can turn out 1-pound batches while sitting on your kitchen countertop.

Introduced in November 2007, the Behmor 1600 won the Specialty Coffee Association of America's award for best new product. To date, Behm has sold almost 5,000 units. Average price: \$300.

His market? Nearly everyone.

About 82 percent of Americans drink this stuff, estimates the National Coffee Association of U.S.A. Other surveys put the figure closer to 50 percent, but there's no question the U.S. slurps more coffee than any other nation, draining 146 billion cups a year.

Where to find some of the county's hottest roasters:

Bird Rock Coffee Roasters

5627 La Jolla Blvd., La Jolla
(858) 551-1707
birdrockcoffeeroasters.com

Cafe Moto

2619 National Ave., Barrio Logan (619) 239-6686.
cafemoto.com

Cafe Virtuoso

1616 National Ave., Barrio Logan (619) 550-1830
cafevirtuoso.com

Caffe Calabria Coffee

Roasting Co.
3933 30th St., North Park
(619) 683-7787
caffecalabria.com

La Costa Coffee Roasting

6965 El Camino Real, Suite 208, Carlsbad (760) 438-8160
lacostacoffee.com

Safari Coffee Roasters

1012 W. El Norte Parkway, Escondido; (760) 740-9575
safaricoffee.com

Behmor Inc.

Working online, Joe Behm sells personal roasters but not coffee: behmor.com

If most people drink coffee, only a handful drink, eat and sleep java. Local coffee roasters have taken a relaxed morning ritual and turned it into a full-time job and lifetime obsession. They roam Central America, Africa and Indonesia, buying direct from farmers and co-ops. They fire up antique roasters capable of hitting 1,300 degrees. And they obey their own quirky set of coffee commandments.

“It's such a subjective business,” admitted Jesse Fox at North Park's Caffe Calabria. “Everybody's got a different formula, a different way of roasting.”

The experts, though, are unanimous about the brew most Americans drink.

Do you buy supermarket beans?

Frappuccinos from “Charbucks?”

Canned coffee?

If so, the experts have one word for you: iccck.

“One hundred thirty million people drink coffee every day in the United States,” Behm said. “If they knew what they were drinking, they'd have a coronary.”

Lizard Latte

Torrey Lee was born into the business. Perhaps that's why he tried to flee it.

Lee's stepfather, Bob Sinclair, founded the original Pannikin in 1968. Lee remembers the La Jolla establishment dumping green coffee beans into a peanut roaster: “It was smoky and dirty.”

As a high school student, Lee worked his way from dishwasher to barista to assistant manager. When it came time to choose a college, he went away – far away – to the University of Alaska.

Lee escaped from La Jolla, but not his destiny. To make ends meet as an undergrad, he worked in a Fairbanks coffee house. He eventually returned to Southern California and the Pannikin. In 1998, he and his wife, Kimberly, bought the chain's coffee roasting division, Cafe Moto.

Moto – the name comes from the family's passion for motorcycles – is one of the county's largest roasters, turning out 8,000 to 10,000 pounds a week. Its natural gas-fired roaster, a Jabez Burns Jubilee, is a 60-year-old workhorse capable of toasting 264-pound batches. Each requires 11 to 20 minutes in the roaster, depending on the coffee's darkness, and another two or three minutes to cool.

San Diego is no Seattle, and the economy, here as across the nation, is colder than iced mocha. But Lee doesn't see any decline in his business, which focuses on selling to restaurants, coffeehouses and markets.

“We still have new clients coming in,” he said.

Demand is also up at Caffè Calabria, where the 1956 roaster handles 6,000 pounds a week.

That figure is pre-roast. The heat sucks moisture from the green beans, which lose up to 20 percent of their weight. Shrinkage continues after the beans cool, when they pass through the “de-stoner” pan, where staffers pluck out debris that was packed in the raw beans' burlap sacks.

Caffè Calabria has found stones, nails, wires, a light bulb's metal base. Once they found a cell phone. Everyone plucks out shriveled or rotten beans, and brass shell casings are common. At La Jolla's Bird Rock Roasters, proprietor Chuck Patton once fished from his de-stoner one well-done reptile. Lizard Latte, anyone?

These are all “defects,” and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration allows a certain amount of flaws in unprocessed coffee. The specialty-grade coffee turned out by local roasters has to meet a higher standard, but not every retailer is so conscientious.

“The stuff in the grocery bins is six months old!” insisted home-roast apostle Behm. “People don't know what they are getting!”

Woozy aroma

People do, though, have strong opinions about their coffee. They favor one brand – or roast, or coffee filter, or coffee maker – over another. They seek and they find.

Usually. In 1991, Arne Holt left Seattle for San Diego. He loved the local climate, loved the local lifestyle, hated the local brew.

“I tried to find a good latte. Nonexistent.”

Holt's uncle built a coffee cart that became a fixture at Grossmont Hospital. There, and now as Caffè Calabria's owner, Holt could produce coffees that meet his criteria.

But a great cup is as personal, and as tough to define, as a great kiss. Your mouth recognizes it, certainly, but can words capture this transcendent experience?

Maybe. Just don't use “cream” or “sugar.”

When customers add anything to a fine coffee, roasters cringe like winemakers witnessing some schlub dropping ice cubes into an award-winning cabernet.

“People are used to drinking bad coffee,” said Patton, the former English teacher who runs Bird Rock Roasters. “They add the cream and sugar to cover that up.”

For a “cupping,” a tasting that Bird Rock hosts every Friday at 10:30 a.m., Patton poured three small cups – Misty Valley from Ethiopia, smelling sweet and berryish; La Plata from Colombia, full-bodied and classic; and Blue Batah from Sumatra. Blue Batah's earthy, herbal notes may be familiar if you grew up on a commune or have attended the right sort of concerts.

“One customer wouldn't buy it again,” Patton said. “People smelled the coffee and thought he was lighting up a joint.”

Outside of the caffeine jolt, though, there's nothing intoxicating about Blue Batah. But Patton insisted that high-quality coffee is best tasted straight.

Stir in some cream, drop in one lump or two? “I would be missing out on what these coffees have to offer,” he said.

Ah, but what's on offer? An expensive and consuming madness, or so it seems when you start shopping for \$36-a-pound Honduran coffee, \$200 German grinders and \$300 home roasting units.

Do you want shade-grown organic espresso? Fair Trade Italian roast? Single-source Colombian from a farmer who, thanks to an honorable contract with a San Diego roaster, is finally able to escape from debt?

Good questions, worth considering. But even someone as coffee-crazed as Joe Behm prefers that such factors don't obscure the bottom line.

“How's this taste to you?” he asked. “That's the rule of thumb.”
