

Coffee, mate Australians everywhere are in a grip of espresso coffee passion

STORY BY DAVID ASTLE



Coffee-making competitions feature alongside woodchopping and ute musters at rural shows. You can now have a cappuccino in bookshops, nurseries, hardware stores, holes-in-the-wall, from specially fitted out mobile espresso vans, and even from motor boats plying Sydney Harbour, Pittwater, and other large bodies of water where lifestyle rules the waves.

TRAVELLING FROM SYDNEY to Brisbane 30 years ago would have been disappointing for anyone hoping for a half-decent coffee along the way. Once past Sydney's North Shore and the aficionado's coffee emporium Belaroma in Roseville, the drive would be through an espresso desert until one reached Brisbane's Italian migrant-inhabited Fortitude Valley. Now, in 2005, baristas rule not just the length of the east coast, but from Broome to Burnie and beyond.

Baristas? The word's not even in the *Macquarie Dictionary* yet, but these espresso maestros orchestrate Australian daily life to a degree unimaginable even five years ago. As we order our short black or skim cap, they work their machines like musicians. *Flack-flack, tap-tap*. They are the glamour pusses of the industry. Take Paul Bassett, 25, who is a star. A kid from Byron Bay, he won the crown of International Barista of 2003, out-grinding 26 other nations in a Boston play-off. Paul has published a DVD, *Coffee Crazy*, hosted a 13-part pay-TV series on the Lifestyle Channel and now signs autographs and endorses milk labels.

Exuding flair and razzamatazz, the baristas are the Hollywood element with Hollywood wages for the very best, their sole gift the art of getting your coffee just right. Some can earn a thousand dollars in the hand for a weekend's work.

Emily Oak, 26, began working as a barista to get through university. In 1999 she graduated with a degree in government and international relations, but found a greater future in coffee. Who's to say she took the wrong path? She now teaches coffee skills at technical college, and operates as espresso consultant, calling on newly opened cafes around Australia.

Lots of people buy cafes and then go 'oh-oh - I have no idea how to make money out of this'. I train staff and work on efficiency and quality. Her prime points of focus are the four Italian Ms of fine espresso: *miscela* (blend), *macinatura* (grind), *macchina* (machine) and *mano* (the barista's hand, or knack).

Such is the demand for a perfect espresso that coffee academies have opened in every State and Territory, offering certificates in blending, bean-grinding, roasting and latte art. They're even training baristas in a women's prison in Windsor, NSW.

Tim Kenneth, who runs coffee appreciation and espresso-making courses on Sydney's northern beaches, says that he noticed a big spike of interest halfway through 2004 and it's been powering on since then, accelerating. We're putting 60 people a month through our courses, he says matter-of-factly. It's no wonder

that terms such as ristretto (a concentrated version of a short black espresso) or macchiato (a short black with a dash of foamed milk) issue easily from the lips of the coffee literate.

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