

More to drinking than caffe lattes

Richard Cornish
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**There's a growing market for specialty coffees, discovers
Richard Cornish.**

Advertisement

It's harvest time at Mountain Top Estate, a coffee plantation high above the NSW town of Nimbin. Although this small Australian specialty coffee producer might not be as well-known as some of the big names on cafe umbrellas, Mountain Top Coffee is quietly succeeding overseas. At Fortnum and Mason in London a 250 gram tin of Mountain Top Coffee is selling for 30 pounds (the equivalent of \$280 a kilogram).

Mountain Top Estate has 30 hectares planted with coffee, making it a medium-sized player in a tiny industry. The entire Australian coffee industry has about 700 hectares under serious coffee production. Brazil, producer of 40% of the world's coffee, has more than 1000 farms this size and tens of thousands of smaller plantations.

"We are too small to be in the commodity game," says Andrew Ford, partner in Mountain Top Coffee. "So we have to make specialty coffee that suits different markets. Most of the world is drinking filter coffee but each country has different tastes. The Scandinavians, for example, prefer a sweeter and lighter-bodied coffee, the Americans prefer more acidity, while the Japanese look for more delicate aromas and flavours," he says. "But in espresso-drinking countries like Italy, Australia, New Zealand and Canada we look for more full-bodied and more complex sweetness."

To understand how Australian single-estate specialty coffee is made, Ford drives us to the top of a hill overlooking the plantation. Rows of deep green coffee trees cling to the hills. Moving slowly along the rows is the harvester, a machine that looks like an upside-down U, which does the job of 500 human coffee pickers. The harvester completely surrounds the trees and drums of vibrating fibreglass fingers knock the coffee "cherries" onto a belt that lifts them into a hopper.

Ford picks a deep-red cherry and breaks it open. Inside is a two-lobed seed surrounded by a pulp that tastes quite sweet. Also on the branches are darker cherries that have dried (in coffee-growing countries where labour is cheap, handpicking and sorting is an ongoing process) and creamy white flowers, which will grow into next year's crop.

The coffee cherries are loaded into machines filled with water for sorting and cleaning. The red cherries sink and go one way, the black cherries float and go the other. The red cherries are skinned and the pulp washed off the bean. These beans are referred to as "washed coffee". The black beans are soaked and the skin removed to reveal the bean. This is a technique developed by Mountain Top Coffee and makes a product called "Double Pass Coffee". This is similar to the traditional "natural" coffees made in countries such as Brazil where cherries are dried in the sun.

What is left is a bean covered in a skin or husk called "parchment". The beans are then twice dried, the parchment still intact, poured into 1000-litre bags and allowed to "rest" for 30 to 90 days at a stable 16C in a process Ford likens to cellaring wine. The parchment is then removed and the green bean packed into hessian bags and shipped around the world.

The coffee cherries are given batch numbers as they enter the processing plant. These batches can later be blended to give the coffee levels of acidity, different aromas, mouthfeel and aftertaste.

To determine which beans go into a blend, a tasting or "cupping" session is held. Small sample batches of green beans are roasted, ground, measured into cups and hot water poured over the grinds.

Beans blended with others from coffee estates in the area are labelled single origin.

Ford says there is a growing appreciation of specialty coffees with cafes such as Brother Baba Budan in Melbourne investing in Clover machines - stainless steel filter-suction machines that make coffee that is far more subtle than espresso.

Ford says: "Times are changing and people are catching on that there is more to coffee than latte."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/02/18/1203190700954.html>