

Sipping point

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IT'S harvest time at Mountain Top Estate, a coffee plantation in the hills above the northern NSW town of Nimbin. This small Australian coffee producer might not be as well known as some of the big names printed on cafe umbrellas but it's quietly succeeding overseas. At London's upmarket Fortnum & Mason store, a 250-gram tin is selling for £30, or \$260 a kilogram.

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With 30 hectares under cultivation, Mountain Top Coffee is a medium-sized player in a tiny industry. The entire Australian industry has about 700 hectares in production. Brazil, producer of 40 per cent of the world's coffee, has more than 1000 farms of 700 hectares, and tens of thousands of smaller plantations.

"We are too small to be in the commodity game," says Mountain Top Coffee's chief executive, Andrew Ford. "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.

"But in espresso drinking countries - such as Italy, Australia, New Zealand and Canada - we look for more full bodied and more complex sweetness."

To show how Australian single estate specialty coffee is made, Ford drives 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 inverted U and does the job of 500 coffee pickers. The harvester surrounds the trees, then drums of vibrating fibreglass fingers knock the coffee cherries onto a belt that lifts them into a hopper.

Ford picks a deep-red coffee cherry from the tree and breaks it open. Inside is a two-lobed seed, surrounded by a sweetish tasting pulp. Small clusters of dried, dark coffee berries sit on the tree, along with flowers, which will grow into next year's crop. They smell like gardenias but with a deeper aroma.

To sort and clean the cherries, they are loaded into machines filled with water. The red cherries sink and are taken one way, the black cherries float and go the other. The red ones are skinned and the pulp washed off the bean. The black beans are soaked, the skin removed and the bean revealed.

This "double pass" technique has been developed by the NSW company; the result is similar to the natural coffees made in countries like 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 16 degrees in a process Ford likens to cellaring wine. After this resting time, the parchment is removed and the green beans packed into hessian bags and shipped around the world.

The coffee cherries get batch numbers as they leave the plantation and enter the processing plant. These batches can later be blended to produce the levels of acidity, different aromas and aftertaste appropriate for their market.

Ford, formerly of Sydney's northern beaches, saw a growing global demand for specialty coffee in the mid-1990s. He and his father planted the 80,000-bush plantation between 1999 and 2001. "My aim was, like the movie business - to get international recognition and then let the domestic sales follow," Ford says. He sells 10 tonnes of specialty coffee annually, divided equally between the domestic market and exports.

A tasting or cupping session determines which beans go into a blend. Small sample batches are roasted, ground, measured into cups and hot water poured over the grinds. Variations between batches can be remarkable. In a cupping we attended,

aromas ranged from spicy to chocolate and lychee.

Interestingly, the coffees made from the red cherries were defined by their lovely acid structure, while those made from the black cherries were predominantly sweeter.

Used in espresso, however, the coffee from red cherries was undrinkably sour. "You can't make espresso from 'washed' coffee," Ford says with considerable understatement. When the double pass coffee is made into an espresso it is full bodied, creamy, sweet and aromatic.

He says there is a growing appreciation of single estate and specialty coffees.

Mountain Top Estate is sold at Allpress Espresso, Rosebery; Coffee Alchemy, Marrickville; and Morgan's Handcrafted Coffee at Emu Plains.

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