

MEET ME IN THE MIDDLE

Coffee is more popular than ever. Bland, mediocre commodity coffee, that is. So will the mainstream ever embrace speciality, asks **Merlin Jobst** – and should they?

MICHAELA POINTON 



Every day in the UK, we consume around 70 million cups of coffee. The country's speciality scene may be small but it is blossoming. On the surface, therefore, it would appear we are a nation in love with coffee... but is that really true?

The beans that go into making the vast majority of those millions of cups are often rife with impurities and have been purposely engineered to taste identical. The question is whether the production and consumption of bad coffee actually matters if, as a nation, we have such an insatiable appetite for the stuff.

For those interested in coffee as more than a mere commodity, achieving a consistent taste as required by coffee chains is anathema. In fact, it's the celebration of coffee's nuances that led to the birth of the speciality movement.

But if coffee's natural inconsistency is something to be embraced, why hasn't the mainstream ever done so?

In reality, it's pretty straightforward: the world's thirst for coffee is too great to be quenched with quality product from single farms. Buying poor-quality green beans from many sources – always the cheapest and most forgiving – before roasting them to near-obliteration has long been standard practice. This consequently informs what the average palate recognises as the “proper” taste of coffee, so the nuances intrinsic to beans – brightness, juiciness, sweetness – are largely unknown, unrecognisable and even unpleasant.

According to Will Corby, head of coffee at Pact, getting people to embrace those nuances requires effort on the part of the roasters. “The first hurdle we have to get over is how to make fresh roast coffee easy and accessible,” he says. “As an industry we have to do that before we start moving off into all the beautiful bits of speciality coffee. If it's not easy, people aren't going to do it.”

MODERN LOVE

Many roasters are now making that effort. Pact has its revolutionary mail-order approach, while Modern Standard – a roaster geared specifically towards bridging the gap between speciality and commercial – has recently hit the shelves of Sainsbury's, which is a monumental victory for a small roaster.

Modern Standard's founder, Lynsey Harley, believes decent coffee is becoming more integrated with the mainstream. The speciality coffee industry is growing by around 12% each year, which she believes is “indicative of people becoming more educated about what is speciality and what isn't”.

However, she also believes it's hard for newcomers to start what she calls "a journey into speciality coffee".

"My mum is often my benchmark," she says. "If she were to walk into a café, would she be welcomed and taken on that journey? Or would the technical language or snobbery put her off?"

As someone who grew up dipping brown sugarcubes into my dad's coffee and eventually drinking thick, bitter cups from our dilapidated cafetière, this hits home. Although I now know it to be bad coffee, there's something to be said for that taste, even if it's pure nostalgia. The jump to speciality is more extreme for my father and many like him who invariably recoil from a cup bursting with bergamot and blueberry flavours. "Telling someone speciality coffee is better than commercial coffee is like saying apples are better than oranges," says Lynsey. "They're related, but mutually exclusive."

Joshua Tarlo of Origin Coffee, a Cornwall-based roastery whose bespoke blends now feature at Brass Rail in Selfridges, also understands this. "Generally people have a long history with coffee, from the early days of seeing their parents drink it to using it as a tool to stay up late or get going early for work," he says. The challenge is "reframing something so familiar to something new".

Will believes that creating "stepping stones into this fantastic world of

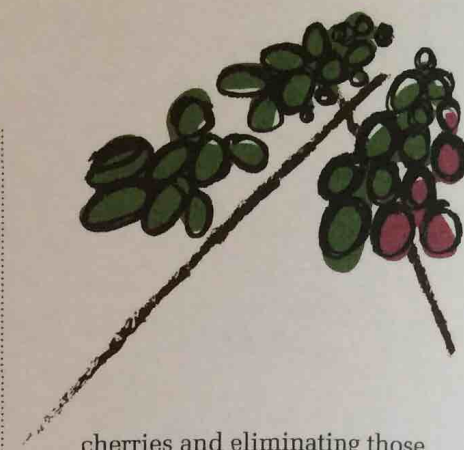
their profiles, and producing the best possible versions of them. "If people want caramel syrup, give them caramel syrup," says Lynsey, "but give them the best caramel syrup you can source."

However, Joshua believes flavour and familiarity may not be an issue for many consumers. All the notes most people attribute to the flavour – chocolate, caramel, toffee – exist in good coffee. "I think the real barrier is the price," he says. "Commodity coffee is cheaper to buy so many people gravitate towards it, which is completely understandable."

Speciality coffee, however, is integral to improving the infrastructure of the industry as a whole, which in its current form is catastrophic for producers. Massive demand and focus on increasing margins forces farms to run at the lowest production costs possible. This often means the integrity of the process – according to Joshua, "a massive part of what makes speciality taste so good" – is compromised.

"The strong demand for low-cost coffee puts producers in a difficult place – they sometimes have to choose between earning a living and ensuring sound environmental practices, or the best care of those in their employ," he says. "Speciality helps relieve that pressure through paying higher prices for quality coffee, which economically empowers those in the chain."

Indeed, the whole process can be improved – from picking only ripe



cherries and eliminating those with defects or insect damage (thereby skipping the need for dark-roasting) to making sure they're dried for the right amount of time. "To ask for those things as a standard isn't really speciality," says Will.

LIGHTEN UP

It seems change is slowly happening – at least according to Paul Meikle-Janney, director of Dark Woods Coffee, another roaster with an eye on opening up speciality coffee to consumers.

"I think speciality coffee will continue to influence the commercial world," he says, "although I don't think it will ever dominate it. I expect the very darkest styles of the commercial world to be lightened over time – never to the very light roast styles favoured by many in the speciality world, but at least less bitter."

Both Paul and Lynsey caution the speciality scene against navel-gazing. "Any business, coffee roastery or otherwise, needs to balance producing a product they think the consumer wants and what the consumer actually wants," Lynsey says.

Will says there are lessons to learn from third-wave veterans Monmouth, which "buys some of the best green coffee out there and roasts it to a level that highlights the sweetness and the other characteristics, and enables customers to relate to it".

The day may even come when the term "speciality" is no longer required. Right now, though, it doesn't mean a great deal to the average consumer, beyond a higher price and the idea that it's probably a bit nicer. As Will says, the term essentially means coffee without defects that has been produced well all the way through the supply chain. Enthusiasts are often guilty, he says of elevating speciality coffee to "something amazing", whereas in reality it's simply what coffee should taste like. "We can't be on our high horse about that," he laughs. "We're not bottling the stars!"

LOW-COST COFFEE PUTS PRODUCERS IN A DIFFICULT PLACE. SPECIALITY HELPS RELIEVE THAT PRESSURE

different tastes and flavour profiles" is essential. "You wouldn't take people who were used to drinking Black Tower wine and say to them, 'Come into this speciality wine shop – we only sell riesling, but as far as we're concerned that's what wine should taste like'," he says. "You might want to move on to something that's of a similar grape variety, or at least a similar taste and flavour profile."

HIGH PROFILE

Most commercial coffee is produced in Brazil and Colombia, making these the basic profiles most people are familiar with. The strategy, then, needs to be taking those coffees and



