


READER'S CHIT

Baristas of Vienna and the art of coffee-making

Caffè Cambio, tucked in the historic Josefstadt district in Vienna, Austria, serves coffee and pastries every morning from 8 AM to 1 PM.

"I like drinking coffee," Marian Hilpert, a barista at Caffè Cambio said about his initial interest in the beverage. He was around coffee for most of his life -- a reason why he now runs a coffee shop in Vienna. His business partner is Elia Termandina. Hilpert prepares most of the food and Termandina makes the coffee.

The average cup of coffee weighs about nine ounces and is one of the most popular drink in the world. In the USA as of 2016, about 54 percent of all people over the age of 18 drink coffee every day.

Coffee is also very popular in Italy, which is where Hilpert first discovered his love for the brew. "The Italians invented the espresso machine," he said, about the history of coffee in Italy.

In Italy, the places that serve coffee are called bars and not cafés. Also, coffee is traditionally cheaper if the drinker is closer to the barista, such as when one takes coffee at the counter instead of sitting at a table. One difference about coffee culture between Italy and the USA is that Italians are very particular about how they want it. They want coffee that is well made and quick. Italians take coffee multiple times a day and each time they have it, they typically drink it fast, sitting at the counter. Thus, in Italy, speed is important in the process of making coffee.

"Before starting at Caffè Cambio, I worked in different bars and cafés for 10 years, where I got experience in roasting," said Elia Termandina, a barista at Caffè Cambio. He found that learning the process of making an espresso was long but worthwhile.

Hilpert looks at the coffee-making process from a more general point of view while Termandina takes a more specific look at it. For Hilpert, the easiest part of the entire process is drinking the coffee. Termandina thinks that the easiest part is setting up the machine for the coffee-making process.

The process of making coffee is simple, yet requires a significant level of focus. Hilpert said that it took him about three years to learn how to make coffee. It was a

longer learning process for Termandina, who said that it took him 10 years.

"The organisation, the workflow that you need to make the perfect cappuccino," Hilpert said, when he was asked about the hardest part of making coffee. He also said that as the orders become more complex, the organisation becomes even more important.

Termandina had a more specific answer. "The hardest part is to get the grind to the right level," he said.

The barista must have the right variety and amount of coffee beans at the proper pressure level. Getting the right pressure is critical because otherwise the coffee will not come out right.



The second key is that the length of time for the coffee to be grounded in the machine is important. "For one cup of coffee, it should be about seven to ten seconds. For two cups of coffee, it should be about 20 to 25 seconds," Termandina said.

There are two ways to check if the barista did the process right. The first is that the coffee doesn't fill the cup up to one-third. This would happen when the barista grinds the coffee too much. The second is that the time that it takes to grind the coffee is not within the range mentioned above.

Making an Italian espresso is faster when two people do it. This is because there are two different processes; coffee-making and

foam-making. The foam-making process is as difficult as coffee-making. The first step is to fill a small pitcher up to one-third with water. Then, some milk is poured into the cup, after which the steamer is put in to create the foam.

The next step is the most difficult because the barista has to hold the cup at a particular angle while the bottom of the cup heats up. There should be no bubbles forming in the foam when the process is completed.

"I don't know. It's like several hundred cappuccinos," Hilpert said about the time it took for him to learn how to use the foam to make a foam design on the coffee. At the end of both the processes, the barista must

pour coffee about halfway to the top of the coffee cup. Then, with the cup at an angle, the foam must be poured in a clockwise direction until a small circle of foam appears before the cup is full. Finally, the barista must change the angle of the foam movement and form a line through the circle. Baristas have to practice this pattern over and over before they can get the right shape consistently.

The last step of this entire process is cleaning everything up. After the coffee is made, the barista must clean all the machines and check the grain, air and time levels to make sure they are still functioning at the right level.

The work that Hilpert and Termandina do on a daily basis is almost that of an artist. The Viennese, like the Italians, would not expect anything but perfection in their coffee. Whether they order an espresso, cappuccino or a mélange (the Austrian term for coffee with milk), the customers at Caffè Cambio want high quality.

Coffee was introduced to Vienna after the end of the Ottoman siege of the Austro-Hungarian capital in 1683. Bags full of coffee beans were found among the spoils of war that the Turks left. The first coffeehouse in Vienna was opened soon after.

Coffeehouses became famous in Vienna in the 19th century. Paul Hofmann, in his book, "The Viennese: Splendor, Twilight, and Exile," explains how places like Café Central and Café Landtmann used to have famous customers such as the psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud; the painter, Gustav Klimt; and the politician, Leon Trotsky. Today, these large cafés co-exist with smaller cafés and both attract locals and tourists.

Some small cafés like Caffè Cambio provide one-day barista training. Hilpert and Termandina have barista sessions where, for 150 euros, people can learn the processes to form an Italian espresso.

In these sessions, Termandina teaches the students the foam and coffee making process step by step. Before starting, he explains how a barista knows when he is making coffee right by checking the grind level and temperature, and shows how to pound the proper amount of coffee grains. After they learn the process, the students practice making a cup several times and Termandina checks if anyone needs to work more on a certain skill. Through many attempts, students have a general idea of how to make a good cup of coffee, complete with the design.

When people, all over the world, order their coffee, they don't think much about the delicate process of making it. Marian Hilpert and Elia Termandina are two of the many baristas, across the world, who have devoted much time and effort mastering this process so that coffee drinkers may enjoy a good cup of coffee.

By Adit Mahmood
Photo courtesy: Adit Mahmood