KOPI LUWAK IS THE MOST EXPENSIVE COFFEE IN THE WORLD DUE TO ITS UNORTHODOX ORIGINS. IT'S PRODUCED FROM THE COFFEE BEANS DIGESTED AND EXCRETED BY AN INDONESIAN CAT CALLED A CIVET CAT. ITS HEFTY PRICE TAG CAN RUN FROM $100 TO $600 A POUND, ACCORDING TO CNN.

Learning how to espresso yourself

Confessions of a coffee-hating Italian **Vanessa Hrvatin**

People never seem to believe me when I tell them I'm Italian. It could be my Slovenian last name or my blonde hair, but I really am Italian.

My dad moved to Canada from northern Italy when he was six, and my mom was born in Montreal after her parents moved from Italy several years before. My entire family is loud (we talk over one another). We love to eat. My Nonno firmly believes that any sickness can be cured with a shot of grappa. And of course, we all love coffee.

Well actually, not all of us do. I can't stand it. I don't like the smell, the taste, or how jittery it makes me feel.

This, of course, has caused some problems for me over the years. In my early teens I would choke down a cup of coffee just because I didn't want to feel left out. Eventually I stopped drinking it all together.

My Nonno in Montreal loved making cappuccino for everyone. In the evening, he would go around the room, point at each person, and say, "cappuccino?" Everyone would nod. Then he'd get to me. "No grazie, Nonno," I'd respond.

He'd freeze. "No?" he'd say, pure shock in his eyes. Then he'd ask several times if I was sure. After saying no a couple hundred times, he'd shake his head, and move on. This happened every single time I visited.

Most of my family still can't accept that I don't drink coffee, but maybe there's a reason for their refusal to move on. After all, coffee is a cornerstone of Italian culture.

In the late 1400's coffee made its way into Italy through Venice, and according to coffee historian Jonathan Morris, this means they were probably the first country in Europe to get their hands on the beans.

For hundreds of years coffee was seen as a luxury, something only accessible to the upper class. By the time the First World War happened, Italians were advertising coffee as a way to keep soldiers awake and ready to fight, but it wasn't until after the Second World War that the Italian coffee craze really took flight.

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By this time different versions of the espresso machine had been developed, a contraption that was ideal because it produced a concentrated cup of coffee quickly. Then, in 1948, Achille Gaggia developed a machine that created crema – the layer of foam that floats on an espresso. "Because the water pressure (from this machine) is so high, you get the crema on top, which is really what makes an espresso an espresso," says Morris.

By the 1960s Italy had become an industrialized country. Coffee shops and supermarkets were common, providing a platform to market the beverage. It was around this time that Italians started drinking coffee at home on a regular basis. Today, the country produces about 70 per cent of the coffee machines in the world, which is one of the reasons coffee is so aligned with Italian culture.

But of course, it's not just the machinery that makes coffee what it is in Italy. "The best Italian espresso blends are harmonious in flavour, and that's contrary to where the speciality coffee world that we're living in has gone," Morris explains. "When people go to Italy they often find the coffee quite difficult to stomach, just as when Italians come here they find our mass coffee equally difficult to stomach."

Even within Italy, coffee preferences differ depending on where you live. In Trieste (the north, where my dad is from), they drink Arabica coffee which has a sweet and delicate taste. In Naples (more south, my mom's parents are from a town one hour northwest of here) you'll find robusta coffee, which is bitter.

But the one rule that seems to unite all Italians is cappuccino in the morning before 11 a.m. – milk on a full stomach is non è buono. You might be able to get away with a café macchiato in the afternoon (coffee with just a drizzle of milk), but typically Italians eat a big lunch followed by an espresso. And this is where my family breaks the rules. They have coffee – including cappuccinos – any time of the day: morning, afternoon and after dinner.

When I ask my mom why this is the case, she isn't sure, and chalks it up to adapting to Canadian culture. Oh, great. Now I'm going to have to start convincing people I'm Canadian as well. Have I mentioned that I can't stand beavertails?

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COFFEE IS KING IN JAPAN

Experience one of the world's most fascinating coffee cultures **Laura Brehaut**

From Tokyo's classic Café de l'Ambre, where centenarian master Sekiguchi Ichiro still roasts the beans, to sleek specialty coffee shops and retro-cool kissaten (traditional coffeehouses), Japan is home to one of the world's most exciting coffee cultures.

This may come as a surprise to the uninitiated, who assume green tea is the chief caffeinated beverage, but Japan is among the world's largest importers of coffee. Experts at manual brewing techniques such as siphon and pour over (a.k.a. hand drip), Japanese coffee-making has had a far-reaching effect on the modern movement.

Coffee equipment companies such as Hario and Kalita are the go-to for specialty-coffee enthusiasts around the world. And coffee pioneers including James Freeman, founder of Oakland, Calif.-based Blue Bottle Coffee Company, credit Japan as a major source of inspiration.

At its best, Japanese coffee exhibits the extraordinary care taken at each stage of the process: from bean selection to the level of roast and grind, and finally the technique and skill of the maker.

Although Japan's taste for coffee is more recent than Europe's, cafes were important spaces in Japanese society well before the "Seattle-driven coffee boom," says Merry White, professor of anthropology at Boston University. In Japan, coffee shops have flourished since the late 19th century.

White has been sipping coffee and observing daily life in Japanese cafés for more than 40 years. She travels to Japan often, conducting research on various aspects of modern society and culture.

Although she doesn't remember how the brew tasted, one of White's earliest Tokyo café experiences during her first trip in the 1960s set the tone for her career in Japanese coffee studies.

"We were asked to take off all our clothes and were painted with blue paint. And I remember thinking at the time, 'Oh wow! This is the most avant-garde place in the world,'" she recalls.

"Only to find out later – which still made it avant-garde – that it was an homage to Yves Klein, the French painter. But it did not distract me from thinking that Japan was the totally cutting-edge place in the world. And it all happened because of coffee."

As White illustrates in her book, Coffee Life in Japan (University of California Press), coffee has been considered an ordinary, everyday Japanese beverage since the early 1900s. Unlike other imports – such as the dining room table or men's dress suit – that retained their Western "scent," she says that coffee became naturalized quickly.

It evolved from being used as a medicine in its early days (the late 1500s) to "a drink for pleasure" roughly 70 years later when the Dutch, Japan's sole trading partner during the Edo period (1603–1868), started giving it as presents to prostitutes in Nagasaki, White explains.

"Japan's first coffee shop of record" was founded in 1888: Kachiichakan in Tokyo. By the end of the nineteenth century, Brazil – today's largest coffee producer – had chosen Japan "as their first targeted, overseas market."

In 1907, the first coffee chain in the world was established in Tokyo and Osaka: the Paulista group. It was a huge success, White says. Adding that today's coffee connoisseurs – in Japan as anywhere else – much prefer independent coffee shops to chains, whether local or imported.

"Specialist coffee in Japan was way ahead of the arrival of Starbucks. The coffeehouse was the number one social space, even more than the bar or the beer hall," she adds.

"In the 1970s, there were three or four coffeehouses per city block in any major Japanese city. There are maybe two now. But still, this is the place you go. It's almost like breathing… It's not necessary to be that conscious. Just do it."

You could spend nearly $20 on an exceptional coffee in Tokyo but options run the gamut across the country. Cold or hot canned coffee is available any time, anywhere via omnipresent vending machines. While convenience stores and homegrown chains such as Doutor Coffee offer inexpensive (and lower-quality) brews.

Until recently, siphon was the most popular method of making coffee in Japan, White says. A French and German invention, it was introduced by the Dutch when they were in residence in the bay of Nagasaki from 1641 until 1853.

At specialty coffee shops, espresso is becoming increasingly common. But at kissaten (pronounced key-sa-ten), you're likely to find pour over coffee, each cup individually hand-dripped. Pour over is the reigning style of coffee-making in Japan, White says. "The spiralling in and spiralling out of the drip. The pinching of the water kettle spout so it exudes just the tiniest stream of water. At a good shop it's like a ballet. It's just beautiful to watch," she adds.

Kissaten offer a unique coffee experience, says Michie Yamamoto, owner of Tandem Coffee in Toronto. Originally from Shizuoka (a city between Tokyo and Nagoya), Yamamoto visits family in Japan regularly. And when she does, it's the kissaten she favours over contemporary cafes.

You can usually identify a kissaten by its retro stylings – the décor and furnishings commonly date back to the 1950s or 60s, she says. They have a comfortable, nostalgic vibe and a slower pace than modern coffee shops. Sometimes, the owner-master will be wearing a tuxedo complete with a bow tie.

"The atmosphere is so amazing. They have many regulars from a long time ago. That's part of their morning (ritual). Every morning they go and chat and have a coffee and maybe smoke some cigarettes," Yamamoto says.

"Most of them make (hand) drip coffee. That's their traditional style, especially the older shops. Last time when we went to Asakusa in Tokyo, we went to quite a few kissaten but none of them had espresso machines."

Coffee masters in Japan historically resisted the espresso machine, White explains. Coffee produced with a machine wasn't considered a handmade product; the device interfered between the coffee and its maker.

Hand drip is the main offering of a kissaten, but many also serve morning set: an inexpensive light breakfast that comes with your first cup of coffee. Both Yamamoto and White recommend visiting Nagoya to experience its tasty take on the breakfast. "There are extraordinary kinds of Nagoya morning set tourism," White says. "So do something a little off the track and find out how people have made coffee not just Japanese but really regional and local."

High technology is a wonderful thing, Yamamoto says. But the time-honoured tradition on display in kissaten offers visitors a fascinating coffee experience that is vastly different from any available in Canada.

Within one of the most refined and trend-setting coffee cultures in the world, kissaten are spaces where attention to customer experience and craft are paramount.

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