

The art, science and emotion of ... Coffee

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Thanks to its ubiquitous nature, coffee in its many varieties and preparation styles seems to beckon fans to see the perfect cup as a kind of a quest for the Holy Grail.

However, that ultimate perfection may only exist in the imagination — and taste buds — of the true coffee lover.



Chad Austin, who has owned the Java Dock Cafe, 116 W. Grand Ave., Port Washington, since January, considers himself “a real coffee nerd.”

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Yet, even Austin is hesitant to offer a can't-miss recommendation for the perfect cup of coffee.

“Making coffee is both science and art,” he said.

“In the coffee business, we talk about the importance of each step, from seed to cup. That includes where the beans are grown, because the altitude and what other crops are grown nearby affect the acidity of the soil.”

Each of those factors can affect the signature flavor, Austin said, but so, too, can the roaster.

Java Dock uses three local coffee roasters — Anodyne Coffee, Collectivo Coffee and Valentine Coffee Roasters — because of the character each gives their roasted beans.

“I love all three, but each does things a little differently. They can all start with the exact same beans and come away with a completely different flavor,” Austin said.

As a general rule, he said, lighter roasting results in a more flavorful coffee. Darker roasts tend to have lower caffeine content, since some of that stimulant is lost in the prolonged roasting process.

Unless your palette leans in a different direction, Austin generally recommends a medium roast because it blends most of the factors that make a great cup of coffee.

Coffee experts suggest that the ideal ratio for coffee is 16 parts water to one part coffee grounds, although Austin said even that formula can vary based on personal taste.

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At the risk of sounding like a commercial, he said real coffee fans are likely to find the best drink at a specialty coffeehouse.

“A coffee shop is going to have the freshest grind, the best equipment and use filtered water. Those factors make a big difference in the taste,” he said.

Austin said he has offered some great coffee choices at his shop, but doubts it is possible to identify one as THE BEST.

“Coffee, like wine or beer, is very much a matter of personal taste. I may find a coffee I really like, and my wife will say she can’t stand it,” he said.

“What makes the best coffee is probably more the human experience you associate with it. Some of the best conversations I have ever had have come over a cup of coffee, and the coffee I have enjoyed most has probably been when I am reading the Sunday paper with my wife.”

Austin said the social power of coffee cannot be ignored.

“I am very passionate about coffee and I am delighted to talk to customers who want to discuss every nuance, like the origin of the beans or the acidity level,” Austin said.

“But for me it is an honor to be the purveyor of something I love so much. There is no better feeling than seeing customers laughing as they enjoy their coffee ... or watching a customer thoughtfully sipping from their cup as they read a favorite book.”

Austin then offered a lesson on the economics of coffee.

“Did you know coffee is the second-most imported commodity in the world, behind only oil? That

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seems fitting, because the world runs on oil but humans run on coffee,” he said.



At Smith Bros. Coffee House, 100 N. Franklin St., Port Washington, manager Chris Wade has become a convert to the charm and allure of the well-brewed cup.

“I am a foodie from way back, but then I got the job managing the coffee shop in 2012 and I kind of went down the rabbit hole,” Wade said.

The shop is owned by Duluth Trading Co., which works with Collectivo Coffee as its roaster of choice.

“Those guys are the real experts. There is so much I have learned from them, and I know I am just scratching the surface,” Wade said.

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He said it is possible to get coffee-shop quality brew at home, but only if a few basics are followed closely.

After all, the ingredients are hard to get wrong — coffee and water.

“The most important thing is that the coffee be as fresh as possible. At the shop, we like our coffee to be roasted within a week of using it — maybe two weeks at the outside,” Wade said.

“Coffee that you buy off the shelf at the grocery store has been around for months or longer.”

As long as the beans are freshly roasted, he said, just about any variety can make a superb cup of coffee.

“It really comes down to a matter of personal taste,” Wade said.

What about his personal favorites?

“I like our El Salvador, which is a seasonal brew that is pretty light. Another favorite is our Shanty Blend from Collectivo, which is a medium roast,” Wade said.

“Good coffee needs good water, either filtered or bottled,” he said.

“At the shop, we use quadruple-filtered water. It makes a real difference.”

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Wade said learning about the art of coffee making has made it all but impossible for him to enjoy home brewed joe.

“I don’t drink it at home anymore. I wait until I come to the shop,” he said.

Wade offered some more discouraging input for at-home coffee drinkers.

“I would have to say the Mr. Coffee approach to making coffee is probably not going to give you a great cup of coffee,” he said.

His preference is to eliminate as many outside factors as possible.

Wade said a French press simplifies the process, pressing the grounds to the bottom of the pot and leaving flavorful coffee at the top.

Another preferred method of making coffee, he said, is a pour-over process where hot water is allowed to cascade over the grounds.

And what is the ideal temperature for coffee? Again, it is hard to come up with any absolutes.

“The water should be at least 140 degrees. I think our water gets as hot as 180 degrees,” Wade said.

He said the coffee expertise of customers who come to Smith Bros. Coffee run the gamut.

“Some people look at coffee as just a caffeine delivery system, but there are others who savor a

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good cup and know exactly what kind of bean and roast they want,” Wade said.

“Ultimately, there is no right or wrong. It all comes down to personal taste.”

Image information:

Chad Austin (above), owner and chief coffee brewer at the Java Dock, and his counterparts at Smith Bros. Coffee Shop fuel the quest for the perfect cup in Port Washington

TODAY'S COFFEE HOUSE is no longer a dark, smoky setting C especially in Port Washington. Above, Kaylen Boyer and Mike Penkwitz carefully prepare a latte at Smith Bros. Coffee House in downtown Port Washington.

Photo by Sam Arendt