



A little essay
about the history of coffee
and cafés as well
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(?) The aim of this essay

(!) Bernd has experiences with both coffee and cafes since decades, gained in quite a few continents and countries which he has visited. His wild and weird observations will be reported.

(?) When was coffee invented?

(!) That's a bit of a mystery ... Yet it seems that growing and using coffee trees began in Ethiopia in the 10th century. The earliest evidence of reaping coffee beans and making coffee drinks refers to the 15th century, in the Sufi monasteries of Yemen - which was at that time part of the Ottoman Empire. For nowadays Ethiopia coffee is certainly an essential feature, including their coffee ceremony.



(?) *What is coffee?*

(!) It is a brewed drink with a distinct aroma and taste. Coffee beans are collected, dried, roasted, milled, and then boiled in cooking water. Coffee has a mildly stimulating effect because of its caffeine content.

There are quite a few ways of preparing coffee, depending on the available pots and heaters. The adding of sweets, especially sugar, and (in Europe) of milk also has a long history; it is crucial part of coffee flairs.



Once coffee became a desired beverage, coffee trees were planted in farms, originally in Yemen and other south-arabian areas.



In early times, coffee was also used in religious ceremonies, yet soon it became a daily practice of almost all people as an available pleasant drink.

(?) *What was the essential town for trading coffee?*

(!) The major marketplace for coffee from the 15th until the early 18th century was Mocha, also called Al Mukha, a harbour town in south-western Yemen (marked in the map).





Dutch, Portuguese, English and French trading ships regularly sailed to the harbour of Mocha in the Red Sea to buy coffee. This product, brought there from inland Yemen, was for a long time the only one, and that's why the trade so much flourished.

Yet once coffee plantations became a worldwide enterprise, Mocha truly lost its importance; it's not the "coffee port" anymore.



(?) *Which countries became "coffee land"?*

- (!) At first, the countries of the Ottoman Empire, its capital was Istanbul in nowadays Turkey. This included Arabia, Egypt and Syria.

Once coffee had reached Amsterdam, London, Venice and so on, basically whole Europe became "coffee land", and later all the colonies of England, Netherlands, Austria and Spain followed, including North and South America and Australia. Even in several Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam, coffee became common.

(?) *Which are the main types of coffee beans?*

- (!) The two main ones are Arabica, the finest and most expensive one, and Robusta, which is nowadays dominating in the main producing countries, such as Brazil, Vietnam, Peru. The Robusta plant is easier to grow.

(?) *When & where were cafés established?*

- (!) Cafés (coffeehouses), venues serving prepared coffee, usually together with some biscuits, have existed for over five hundred years. Outside Mocha, the first one was established in Mekka (around 1520). Other early ones were Damascus (1530), Cairo (1540) and Istanbul (1554).



In Europe, it began with Venice (1645), then Oxford (1650), London (1652), Bucharest (1667), Paris (1672), Hamburg (1677), and Vienna (1683).



Cafés became soon a central place for social and cultural and political agendas. Yet because of that they sometimes got forbidden, 1530 by imams in Mekka, 1675 by king Charles II in London - with no effect though.

Clearly cafes are part of history. The most famous city for cafés became Vienna - and still is!

(?) *How do 'classical' 'grand' cafés look like?*

(!) The 'grand' cafés were at first a Viennese phenomenon, yet soon other cities such as Budapest or Paris or Prague followed ...

Here are a few landmarks, all Vienna:



What's very much the special culture of these cafés:

People can sit there and read, lots of newspapers are available, wonderful cakes & cookies are on offer, and the waiters/ waitresses are well-dressed and well-mannered. Some places even have a piano player!

(All this is obviously pretty much unknown in Australia).

(?) *How is coffee made?*

(!) Over the last 500 years, coffee has been made in very many ways - this would be an essay on its own ...

Today just a few tools dominate - at home it's mostly a plunger (invented in France), or a coffee filter tool (invented in Germany), and sometimes the Italian "Mokapot Bialetti".



In cafés, bistros and restaurants there is almost always a professional espresso machine.



(?) *When and where was the espresso invented?*

(!) An espresso machine is a tool that prepares a special beverage by pushing very hot water (about 90 celsius) under high pressure through ground coffee and a filter, thereby producing a thick, concentrated coffee. The resulting coffee is named espresso (an Italian word). Those making it, if properly trained, are called a barista.

This stunning machine was invented 1885 in Torino in Italy. In 1905 the regular production began in Milano.



Meanwhile these are obviously high-tech devices, and most of them are produced by Italian companies. This includes large machines for cafés and restaurants.



Original 'arty' designs also flourish - they are meant to enrich a modern home.

To make it clear - - in 1885 has indeed the coffee culture changed immensely! Because from now on the new coffee type "espresso" began to dominate, certainly in most European countries.

And all coffee-making machines which are able to create an espresso are called "espresso machines", mostly produced in Milano.

(?) Does Bernd have coffee machines?

- (!) Yes - quite a few indeed ...here they are, plungers and vacuum designs and machines which operate on high pressure; these, called Moka or Bialetti, are made for many decades yet are still popular.



Plus, he owns a very unusual tricky quasi-espresso machine, called "Picco", which is based on rotation rather than high pressure, invented around 1975.

It's a vintage piece now - yet still works well!



(?) What kind of coffees are nowadays on offer?

- (!) In general terms - there are truly black coffees, and those which contain milk, or are even ruled by milk. Here is a rough overview:

Black coffees:

Plain black beverage, single espresso, double espresso (in Australia: short or long black), poka, turkish coffee.

Milky coffees:

Cappuccino, coffee latte, flat white, macchiato. There are many special milk-based coffees in particular countries, such as Austria, France, Cuba, Vietnam and so on.

One can question though whether milky coffees actually are "coffee" - some purists, like Bernd, think they are milk beverages, with coffee added to give them a special flavour. Cafés actually need to offer them, given their customers liking ...

(?) Does Bernd like coffee?

- (!) Yes of course! Very much so - yet only black coffee (!), plus a little bit of sugar. All the 'milky' ones are a "no" for him!

By the way -- Bernd has a very long history of drinking, and soon enjoying, coffee. It began in about 1950, in Germany, after the war, when only bad locally made coffee was available named "Muckefuck". But from 1955 onwards, when connections to "coffee countries", like Brazil, got re-established eventually good coffee became feasible.

(?) Did Bernd indulge in "coffee trips"?

- (!) Yes he did. When he lived in Hamburg/Germany, he drove by car to Amsterdam/Netherlands. Later, meanwhile a resident of Mannheim/Germany (see "Ma" in the map below), he went by train to Paris/France and back. Both was okay in terms of coffee and cafés but not super.

And then he began to use the night train from Mannheim to Milano/Italy, spent the day there, had an espresso about once an hour, and returned home in the evening, again travelling by night train.

That set life-long very high standards!



(?) Which are the coffee capitals of the world?

(!) Vienna in Austria may think so, because it is obviously a capital of cafés. However, the invention of the espresso changed things immensely, and thus Italy claims - with strong reasons - to be the coffee capital of the world, especially Milano.

As a resident of Melbourne, Bernd is under considerable pressure to assume that it is rather Australia, yet this is a bit buoyant ...

Another country with such a claim is Argentina. And when Bernd was for a week in its capital city, Buenos Aires, he was truly overwhelmed by the very high standard of both, coffee and cafés, over there!

Plus, all the fine pastry bits and cakes on offer in about every venue - tempting, tempting, tempting ...



After Buenos Aires, Bernd traveled to Santiago de Chile, another south-american capital city, well-known for its rich culture.

And there again coffee and cafés were high class - Santiago can easily fulfill highest claims as well.

What really blew Bernd away there was the "Cafés & Legs" fashion. Almost all venues in the inner city followed this stunning style!



Amazingly, the quality of the coffee, as well as the serving standard, was "far above the ground" in these places anyway.

(?) Is coffee healthy or unhealthy?

(!) This question has been researched for many decades. The results are not yet fully clarifying the "healthy versus unhealthy" issue.

Coffee is slightly acidic, and it has a mild stimulating effect on most humans because of its caffeine content. However, people under the risk of heart problems shall avoid strong coffee use. Altogether, it seems that moderate coffee consumption is benign or mildly beneficial for healthy adults.

Meanwhile the understanding of good features of coffee has considerably improved. It is confirmed now that coffee is good for the heart. However, there are two but's: Only true black coffee is efficient in this regard – neither "coffee with sugar" nor "coffee with milk" can support the heart. So in medical terms one should indeed consume black coffee, that's espresso!

(?) Has the meaning of "Café" altered?

(!) Yes, certainly in Melbourne. Here the label "Café" means, it's a bistro, which offers all sorts of basic food, including fast food - and possibly coffee and cookies, but that's not sure.

(?) What's a mobile (quasi-)café?

(!) These are "cafés" which can go about everywhere, because they are built into a car! Many of them are seriously equipped with espresso machines. However, coffee is served in paper cups.



Mobile (quasi-)cafés can be found all over the world, in rich as well as in less wealthy countries. They are set up wherever people may be looking out for a coffee (and where authorities are not impeding them...)

Some kind of such coffee shops are based on motorbikes.



There are even bicycle cafes, "alternative" of course, very cute devices.



Whatever 'miniature' such mobile cafés may be, some of them are handled by well-trained and even well-dressed servants.

(?) How about artificial coffee?

- (!) The crucial development was "instant" coffee, invented in New Zealand in 1890, and then elaborated by people in USA. The crucial innovation was "Nescafe" by the Nestle company in Switzerland, based on an advanced coffee refining process; it's traded since 1938.

Instant coffee is coffee in powder-form, which generates a coffee-like beverage when put into hot water. This is easy and convenient - yet the outcome cannot match real coffee -- at least not for people who know real coffee!

By the way, conveniently milk to add to a cup of coffee can also be provided as powder.

(?) Is there caffeine-free coffee?

- (!) Yes there is. The reason is that some people have trouble with coffee, or at least believe so. Therefore caffeine-free coffee has been developed. In all decaffeination processes, coffee is 'decaffeinated' in its green, unroasted state.





(?) *Have the "coffee culture" and "café culture" changed?*

(!) Yes, immensely -- certainly here in Melbourne -- first up up up, now down down down!

Firstly, while 'real' coffee was pretty much unknown for almost 200 years, at the end of the 20th century all of a sudden things changed, because espresso machines became a 'must' for about every café or bistro.

Secondly, making proper café became a profession, and people who had done a pertinent course were called baristas.

Thirdly, for about a decade proper café was almost a fashion. Within the Italian Festival competitions about the best café were conducted, and even a quasi-race about fast café-delivery was run!



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Fourthly, truly black coffees (called "short-black" and "long-black" everywhere in Australia) are very much on the way down, because the various types of 'milky' coffee clearly dominate more and more - only about a fifth of customers, or even only a tenth, want black coffee.

Fifthly, most customers are in a hurry, or a decent well-made coffee simply doesn't mean anything to them ...

So they buy a coffee in a plastic container and rush away - they seem to believe, no time to sit down, even for a few "coffee-minutes" ...

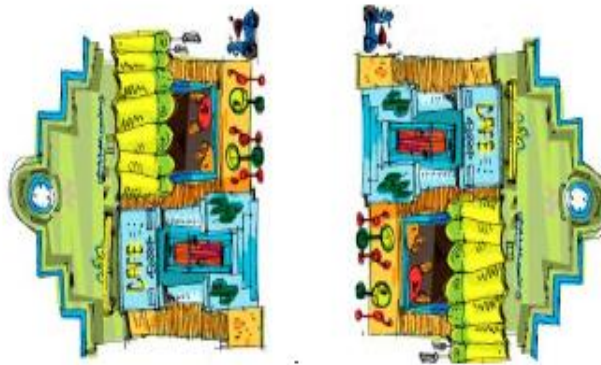


Sixthly, very many cafes, certainly the chains, like Starbucks or Gloria, don't have coffee cups anymore - one gets coffee in plastic mugs, which are often showing an ad.

Bernd is lucky that his main venues, on Rathdowne Street in Carlton, still offer coffee cups!

Seventhly, for many people 'real' coffee doesn't matter anymore, instant coffee, usually plus instant milk, is all they want ...

Finally - for hundreds of years cafés were also community venues, that is, places where people would meet to discuss any kind of societal issue. Sometimes history was made in cafés! It seems that cafés are still social sites, and places of true coffee cultivation, in parts of Near-East and of Europe (and even in Scotland) - - yet this significant culture is more or less vanishing, certainly in Melbourne ...



(?) In the end - what are Bernd's favourite coffees?

(!) There are two: ♦ Turkish coffee, and ♦ Italian true espresso.



Turkish coffee is made in a special pot on open fire, using finely graded coffee beans and powder sugar; usually a turkish sweet is also offered. What a unique coffee!

Italian true espresso is made in a high-core espresso machine by a 'barista', it is very black yet has a thick layer of 'crema' on top. If sugar is wished, it gets added afterwards. Great!

!:/ Postscriptum: The coffee ceremony in Ethiopia

(!) Ethiopia claims, and rightly so, that they did invent coffee (as outlined in the introduction).

For the nowadays Ethiopia, coffee is certainly an essential feature, and this includes their coffee ceremony.



While in Ethiopia, I experienced it twice. It's quite a procedure!

A variety of coffee pots is set up, together with 10 or 20 little cups, and possibly some sweets as well.



At first coffee beans get selected, then powdered in a pertinent punch bowl, then cooked in several turns, and finally served. Later a second cop gets offered.

And the ladies doing this were always very friendly and cheerful. What a pleasant happening!

(?) Finally finally finally: How about the future of coffee and cafes?

(!) The outlook is not easy, because this is not a simple, rather a tricky issue, and many traditions obviously are under threat.

Bernd thinks that coffee as a daily kind of very normal beverage will survive in most regions of the world.

Yet Bernd also thinks that all the “true” types of coffees, especially the espresso, meaning the pure black coffee, will die. Why? Because the vast majority of people nowadays prefer to drink something in which milk dominates coffee, like Cappuccino or Latte.

Furthermore Bernd thinks that the once high culture of using stylish cups in cafes, made from porcelain and often painted, comes to an end, because ordinary paper cups or plastic cups are far cheaper, and easier to use for the many restless people.

Finally Bernd thinks that the current ‘hi-tech’ coffee machines are not needed anymore if the classical espressos are replaced by plain coffee+milk (or rather milk+coffee) beverages.

Does Bernd like what’s going to happen? No, he, an almost obsessed coffee fan, and certainly loving black coffee (espresso with no milk and no sugar) find sad what’s likely to happen.

Right now (in 2025) only about 10% of the coffee community still drink black coffee and espresso. And the experts re future believe in about a decade it will be pretty dead.



So, what to conclude? To continue to enjoy all kind of coffee, and to give “classical” styles serious honest attention.



This means: Only visit cafes which have a high-core espresso machine and present the coffee in excellent cups. Yes, yes, yes!

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