

Los Altos coffee

What's hip to sip

By Elizabeth Ridgeway
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A coffee store can be found on almost any corner these days. Downtown Los Altos has four coffee shops – Peet's Coffee and Tea, Starbucks, The Village Pantry and Mainstreet Café and Books – all within a three-block radius. Any cup will deliver some necessary morning caffeine, but for quality and flavor, it pays to be a discerning consumer.

A cup of coffee can be judged on its freshness, its roast, how well it has been made and the subjective qualities of its flavor. Preference can be the most important step in picking a coffee drink – some people just don't like espresso, for instance, while others love the darkest, earthiest shot possible.

"We make your drip coffee out of a mix of five different roasts, and test each version for people's reactions," says Julie Ogilvie, co-owner of The Village Pantry, 184 Second St. "Some people say, 'I want it strong.' I tell them to go with the espresso. If they want smooth, they should get the drip coffee."

Ogilvie's vintage espresso machine sits behind the counter with a grinder – she uses Peet's beans – and she commented that the machine is so old that parts are hard to find these days.

All the regulars at the counter Thursday morning drank her drip coffee. Ogilvie prides herself on the continuity of the place, with its unchanging menu and long tradition of being the neighborhood's only independent coffee shop. Nonetheless, she pulled a mean cappuccino, one of the most difficult coffee drinks to make well. A single shot of espresso topped with soft, wet milk foam, Ogilvie's cappuccino provided a good balance, the milk sliding down into the espresso in pretty waves of cream.

Around the corner at Peet's Coffee and Tea, business was brisk, but few people stopped to sit and chat. Founded in Berkeley in 1966 and now spread to seven states, the company brands itself as an artisan coffee roaster with an emphasis on freshness. As well as buying roasted coffee and coffee drinks,



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at Peet's anyone can bring in an empty container to take old coffee grounds for garden compost. Unlike fully automated coffee chains like Starbucks, Peet's still pulls its espresso by hand, allowing individual baristas to influence the coffee drinks.

"They bring in a master-trainer from Berkeley to train new baristas," said Kristen Sharpley as she pulled shots behind the counter. "They throw you into the fire and you figure it out, learn from the people around you." She didn't drink coffee before she began working at Peet's, but, "Now I have to factor drinks into my budget when I'm not here at work," she said.

Sharpley and other baristas at the counter described being initiated into the world of coffee and learning its lingo. "I recognize people on the street by their drinks – hey, that guy is the half-caf, skinny mocha," Sharpley said.

Jael Ruiz has worked at Mainstreet Café and Books since it opened two years ago, and said that for her, learning to pull a shot of espresso was all about practice. As in all the other coffee shops in town, the menu didn't list a macchiato, a shot of espresso topped with a dollop of foam, but on request Ruiz promptly pulled the classic drink. At most coffee shops, drinks can be made to order to suit individual preferences.

Those who can't find what they want in neighborhood coffee shops have turned to home roasting and espresso-making to search for the perfect cuppa. Home-roasted coffee used to be a part of daily life in early America, and roasting can be as easy as making popcorn on a stovetop. The inexpensive green beans take only a few minutes to roast, and one batch lasts for several days.

Oakland serves as the specialty coffee port in the United States, and Sweet Maria's, an Oakland-based coffee warehouse, procures green beans from around the world. As well



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Julie Ogilvie, co-owner of The Village Pantry, serves up a cappuccino.

how the flavor lingers in your mouth. I get more things out of drip coffee because I can taste more. It isn't so overpowering."

As a first step for coffee-lovers who want to learn more, Troy recommends looking in your neighborhood: "If you can get stuff that was roasted locally, you can talk to someone to learn about the coffee – and they might have better variety. Finding good coffee is the first important step."

The next key item is a good-quality coffee grinder, which can have a big effect on coffee's flavor. Brewing methods are more a matter of taste – a French press allows for the best control over

ent tastes.

Coffee buyers like Sweet Maria's compare beans through "cupping," a tasting ritual anyone can do at home on a small scale. Brew two kinds of coffee, and sniff each one's aroma. Sip a taste and chew the coffee so that it reaches every taste bud as you look for elements like acidity, body and flavor. There are no right answers, only preferences.

Beans aged by the monsoon winds of India for several years have a funky, musty taste, for the truly brave. One of the most expensive coffees in the world, Kopi Luwak, is made from beans culled from the dung of a mar-