

NEW ADVENTURES IN COLD BREW:

# FLASH BREW

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Every barista can tell you about brewing coffee with cold water in plastic buckets in the back room. The resulting smooth, low-acid cold brew has been popular at cafés since around 2011, when Stumptown debuted its ready-to-drink (RTD) “stubby” bottles of the concentrated elixir. Like so many consumables however, taste preferences in cold brew are subjective, and for some roasters—including Oakland, Calif.-based Highwire Coffee’s cofounder Robert Myers—that kind of cold brew didn’t cut it. “When people started getting excited about [cold brew made by steeping grounds in water], I didn’t understand it,” he says. His search for what he preferred in a cold coffee—and what he hoped his customers would enjoy—continued.

Enter flash-brew coffee, which is coffee brewed hot, and then immediately chilled and stored cold. Flash-brew coffee has all the floridity, elegance, and vibrancy of hot coffee, and a lot of specialty roasters are catching on.

With in-house flash-chilled coffees taking a permanent place on

an increasing number of café menus—Highwire’s “Howling Wolf,” a flash-brewed nitrogenized coffee, has been on the menu since 2014, for example—some innovative roasters began to consider the feasibility of canning the concept. Verve Coffee Roasters of Santa Cruz, Calif., led the charge with the launch of its RTD flash brew in a can in November 2018.

Verve cofounder Colby Barr is quick to disclose that his dissatisfaction with the generic cold-brew method played no small part in the development of the Verve Nitro Flash Brew RTD. In a come-to-Jesus moment, Colby remembers asking himself, “Why do we as coffee people measure [coffee] to the tenth of a gram, measure water to a tenth of a degree [for hot coffee], and then we literally make cold brew in buckets in a bathroom by a mop sink with, like, the leftover coffee from the end of the week off the whole-bean shelf?”

That moment actually took place back around 2013, when Verve, shall we say, kicked the bucket. That was when Colby and his team started tinkering with their cold-brewing techniques for café service.





## “IT’S ALMOST LIKE A LIVING THING.”

—COLBY BARR,  
VERVE COFFEE ROASTERS, OF  
FLASH BREW, WHICH HE SAYS  
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NEXT BIG THING IN RTD COFFEE

“Every barista knows about the buckets in the back by the mop sink. Everyone knows about that. [We said] Let’s go against that completely and figure out how we want to brew coffee completely different from that process. I don’t want my coffee to sit for 24 hours. I don’t want to use cold or lukewarm water. I want to use hot water.”

These days, you’d be hard-pressed to find a coffee shop in the United States that doesn’t serve some kind of cold brew. Traditionally, that has been defined as coarsely ground coffee steeped anywhere from 12 to 24 hours in cold or lukewarm water, filtered, stored, and served chilled. The fervor over the past eight years that has seen cold brew transition from trend to menu mainstay, however, doesn’t belie the 400-plus-year history of cold-brewed coffee, which in fact was first documented in Japan in the 1600s.

Its contemporary incarnations—RTD drinks available everywhere from your local indie roaster to mega grocery stores—have seen a jump from \$8.1 million to \$38.1 million in sales from 2015 to 2017, according to a report from *Forbes* in May 2018.

There’s a reason the Toddy method has persevered for so long: Brewing coffee in cold water keeps the molecular structure of the bean intact and minimizes acidity, leaving a smoother, more chocolatey taste than hot coffee. Some roasters add nitrogen to cold brew, staving off the staling effects of oxidation and giving the beverage a milk-foamy mouthfeel. But nitrogen doesn’t change the structure of the coffee, says Christian Krause, brand manager and product designer at Brewista, Inc. “Because nitrogen bubbles are popping or effervescing, it actually brings out more of the natural aromas you would get from coffee that isn’t in standard cold brew but is in hot coffee,” he explains.

Cheyenne, Wyo.-based Brewista designs and manufactures coffee-brewing products including the Cold Pro Nitro, a cold-coffee dispenser with a small footprint that pulls nitrogen from the surrounding air—no nitrogen tank needed. The Cold Pro Nitro won first place in the non-consumable category at Portland Coffee Fest in 2017. Still, even with the benefits of nitrogen, a lot of mass-produced cold coffee isn’t known for vibrant flavor profiles.

Cold brew’s boast of having a low-acidic, chocolatey flavor comes at the sacrifice of, well, the acids themselves: florals and other complexities of coffee that can only be extracted with hot brewing methods. Flash brewing puts the spotlight back on subtle nuances in the coffee, which is exactly what many roasters want.

Nashville, Tenn.’s two locations of Stay Golden Restaurant and Roastery

are known for the company’s transparent coffee-sourcing program. “We have the goal of sourcing all of our coffees through direct relationships that benefit farmers by 2020, and we have lots of relationships with local food producers,” says Nathanael Mehrens, Stay Golden’s beverage director. Noting the hydroponic garden at Stay Golden’s roastery, which produces a lot of the food they make, as well as partnerships with local companies to compost and recycle as much waste as possible, Nathanael says that using flash brew instead of a full-immersion cold-brew system was an easy choice.

“Cold brew tends to be less dynamic and [less] reflective of the coffees we work so hard to source and roast,” Nathanael says. “One of the cool things about using [flash brew] is that it allows us to feature whichever featured origin we have to offer at the time. So the profile changes along with the specific coffee.”

Stay Golden’s in-house flash brew starts with hot brewed coffee that is immediately put through a heat exchanger that lowers the temperature below 40°F in seconds. The coffee is then stored in a tank and flushed with nitrogen before being tapped for in-house consumption. Another distinguishing trait of flash brew? The name is no joke: A batch of flash-brewed coffee can be made in minutes as opposed to the 12-to-24-hour brewing period that standard cold brew requires.

At Highwire Coffee’s three locations in the San Francisco Bay Area, flash-brew coffee is brewed on demand, using both Curtis brewers and a Ground Control brewer. Made by Oakland-based start-up Voga, Ground Control is a full-immersion brewer with a vacuum on it, thus offering more control over extraction, says Robert of Highwire. In-house, Highwire makes flash brew in batches of 1.5 gallons at a time. “We go through it about as fast as we can make it,” he says.

The method is actually second nature to Robert, whose coffee career stretches back to the 1990s with Peet’s Coffee, which was, he says, “always doing what we now call flash brewed. Peet’s coffee didn’t particularly have any brightness to it, but it was how I learned to make cold coffee.”

Today Highwire uses a blend called Tight Rope for its flash brew. “We really try to balance origin character with body,” he says. “What we’re looking for is some chocolatey-ness that will translate with cold but not turn into Baker’s Chocolate or something really bitter, and then juiciness on top of it. That’s the goal—to have the experience of a big mouthfeel without having it all be heavy notes.”

When Highwire makes bigger batches, using around 40 pounds of beans, the baristas brew with hot water to get the extraction and bloom. After that, “We agitate the grounds and then we drop it in a

cold-water tank with glycol cooling. So it cools down really fast, and then we nitrogenate from there," Robert says.

You could say flash brew is big in the San Francisco Bay Area, with Verve, Highwire, and also Sightglass Coffee Company, which rolled out a flash-chilled coffee in October 2018. Although Sightglass's Vanilla Iced Cold Brew, a cold-steeped coffee with vanilla paste, agave nectar, and milk, has been a menu staple for eight years, until last fall, Sightglass had never offered a stand-alone cold brew.

"We never really loved cold brew on its own," says Justin Morrison, Sightglass' cofounder with his brother, Jerad. "Traditionally we've always served iced pourovers. That was our answer [to cold brew] early on. We recently transitioned from doing iced pourovers and are doing what we call Sightglass Cold."

Jerad adds, "Our goal was to try to come up with a cold coffee that was actually representative of the coffees that we're sourcing and representative of the way that we're roasting those coffees."

Sightglass Cold is made at the company's lab in San Francisco's Mission District, and transported to the four café locations. Here's the recipe: Hot coffee is brewed in 5-gallon batches in a Fetco industrial batch brewer, after which it's passed through a glycol chiller that takes it from 200°F to 40°F in a matter of seconds. The coffee is then immediately transferred into a keg and flushed with nitrogen. Known for being Sightglass' "Saturday morning staple," the Blueboon blend was selected for the flash-brew debut. Moving forward, the Morrison brothers will feature different single origins as flash brew. When it comes to considering RTD cans or bottles of Sightglass Cold, the founders are taking their time. "We're in no hurry to rush to get to that phase," Jerad says. "We're just excited to have a cold-style coffee that tastes as good as it does in the stores."

As the first to introduce an RTD flash brew into a market already

saturated with cold coffee, Verve's Colby Barr predicts the category will only grow. "From the point of view of just entering the market, we had a lot of conversations about what does it really mean to say, 'Yeah there's cold brew and that's what the market is filled with, and we're gonna go against that.'? What does that mean for us and how do we want to do that in a way that isn't just schtick?" he muses. "Everyone's interested because it's different. We're just barely getting the ball rolling."

Since Verve started in Santa Cruz in 2007, the company has ventured outside of its seaside enclave to open shops in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Tokyo. The canned flash brew, however, is produced at the Santa Cruz headquarters. The concoction is 75 percent Farmlevel Ethiopian Mormora Natural and 25 percent Colombian Argcafe. Colby says the Ethiopian Mormora provides sweet and aromatic flavors, while the Colombian brings a round body with a candied orange sweetness. Using a proprietary microbrew approach, Verve utilizes specific water profiles, temperatures, pressures, and filtering and flash-chilling techniques, and then flushes the coffee with nitrogen before transferring it into a can at the right pH for stability. Nitrogen acts as a barrier against the enemy oxygen, and the end result is a "vibrant, clean, floral, complex, elegant flash brew," Colby says.

Though Verve's canned flash brew has been on the market less than six months, Colby's got his sights set on a line of flash-brew products, some to feature single-origin coffees, and others to incorporate plant-based milks.

One thing's for sure, Colby says: Flash brew has the potential to be the next big thing in RTD coffee. "It's almost like a living thing." **b**

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The graphic is a blue background with white line art illustrations of various coffee grinding equipment. In the center, a large red '20' is overlaid with a colorful circular swirl. The word 'BARATZA' is in a black box within the swirl. The text 'Flat Burrs' is on the left, 'Conical Burrs' is on the right, and 'Sette Series' is at the bottom center. The hashtag '#WEGRIND YOUTHBREW' is in the bottom right, and 'VISIT US AT EXPO TO SEE WHAT'S NEW BOOTH #759' is in the bottom left.