

NEWS

Pursuit of the perfect cup is becoming a costly quest for coffee connoisseurs

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NEW YORK - “I hope I’m not talking too fast,” David Dallis, president of Dallis Coffee, said to a rapt audience during a recent tour of his roasting plant in Queens.

Hardly. This was a caffeinated crowd, devotees of the perfect home-made espresso, with a thirst for knowledge and an accelerated sense of time.

There was Owen Egan, a photographer from Montreal who took along a high-tech thermometer and a thermocouple, which he uses to test temperatures in the commercial espresso machine he keeps in his kitchen.

Madeleine Page, a psychotherapist from Philadelphia, wanted to talk about reassembling her second-hand commercial Cimbali, which she has stripped down to its parts. The effort, she said, would be worth it: “I couldn’t find a good latte.”

Leaders of a zealous subculture, they and about a dozen others had come to hear insights from a master and to share the joys and frustrations of taming high-pressure steam to make the perfect cup. Normally they would meet only at Web sites like wholelattelove.com and coffeergeek.com.

Not long ago, coffee fanatics were thrilled to be within walking distance of fresh cappuccino. But soon that didn’t cut it – and neither did Krups and Pavoni home espresso makers, derided by the hard core as “steam toys” and “chrome peacocks.”

In time, other Web sites began selling exotic equipment. Now machines that once sold in the hundreds sell in the thousands – in many cases without benefit of advertising – and \$1,900 coffee apparatuses are popping up in department stores.

Seeing how these Web-connected coffee evangelists had driven up their market, the high council of high-end coffee, the Specialty Coffee Association of America, recently invited 50 of

them to join. In exchange for insights into espresso lust, these outsiders get inside tours and industry briefings.

Some visitors at Dallis were so excited that it looked as if they might climb right into the plant's two-story roaster.

"We're in constant pursuit of perfection," said Fortune Elkins, a Web designer from Brooklyn, who pulled espresso shots at Dallis' \$7,000 Faema machine with the reverence of a Springsteen fan allowed backstage.

It's a pursuit, Ms. Elkins said, more demanding than the one facing wine buffs. "Coffee has 800 to 1,200 flavor components," she said. "Also because wine isn't cooked or prepared, that adds components. It's an entire process."

To reach espresso nirvana, some have been known to tear up kitchen cabinets to make room for professional grinders, to run roasters in the fireplace and to turn their rec rooms into espresso bars. Others soup up their machines with laboratory thermostats and get filter holders with extra-large handles and "necks" that can withstand repeated whacks on a spent-grounds "knock box."

Espresso extremists began to surface in the late 1990s, when a generation of coffee lovers, primed by Starbucks and probably having trouble sleeping, met in late-night chats at an obscure newsgroup, alt.coffee.

The tipping-point for this micro-movement came in 1998, when the Italian company Rancilio introduced a promotional version of its commercial coffee makers, the Sylvia, priced at about \$350. Mark Prince, a Web designer in Vancouver, British Columbia, was so taken with the froth on his Sylvia-steamed cappuccinos that he created a Web site to sing its praises – in 75,000 words and more than 50 photographs.

Glenn Surlet, the vice president for sales in North America for Rancilio, said Mr. Prince had helped push sales of Sylvia from about 450 to about 4,500 – even though the squat, heavy-set machine is not available in stores.

"He's done a lot of really good things for Rancilio," Mr. Surlet said, noting sadly that Mr. Prince has since moved on to bigger things (specifically, a \$7,500, 140-pound La Marzocco, described at one Web site as having a microprocessor-driven programmable dosing system, a double-boiler with a stable thermal mass and a lifetime ability to crank out 1 million cups.)

The detailed instructions that Mr. Prince gave at his other sites, coffeageek.com and coffeekid.com – like how to shorten the Sylvia’s warm-up time to six minutes from 30 – fed a hunger for information among espresso fanatics frustrated by the shortcomings of some machines, not to mention owner’s manuals loosely translated from the Italian.

Espresso envy spread. In January, [coffeageek](http://coffeageek.com) had more than 150,000 individual viewers, Mr. Prince said.

Todd Salzman, a former boiler repairman, and his brother, Gary, a former comptroller for an ambulance service, helped found wholelattelove.com in 1997.

Gary Salzman said sales of their high-end coffee equipment are rising about 60 percent a year.