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good food

AUSTRALIA'S HOME OF THE HATS

WHAT'S BREWING

The latest trends in coffee, from iced innovations to training for home baristas. **PAGE 4**





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A whole latte love for coffee

More gadgets are in the hands of home baristas than ever before. But cafes keep wowing us, too, from filter on tap to foam-topped iced drinks.



When cafes split themselves along milk versus black coffee lines, home baristas drop thousands of dollars on a grinder, and brunch enthusiasts queue for a social media-famous iced coffee drink, it's fair to say we're riding the fourth wave of coffee.

Caffeine is firmly entrenched as a daily luxury among Australians, and we expect it to be just as bespoke as a couture item. Last financial year, we spent more than \$10 billion in 33,000 cafes nationwide, most of them independent.

Tighter budgets don't deter us either. "Changes in discretionary incomes influence the food segment more than the coffee segment," according to a November report by research firm IBISWorld.

"Consumers often consider coffee an affordable luxury, despite fluctuating discretionary incomes." We have our favourite brands of almond milk and beans, one cafe we seek out for iced lattes, another for espresso, and yet another for their enviro credentials. But the scene is getting even more specialised – and not just in our cafes.

Making coffee at home became a daily act of grace during the pandemic years, leading to a groundswell of budding baristas who are now honing their craft.

Coffee machines are the second-largest category of small appliances sold online in Australia, making up more than a fifth of all items sold, according to IBISWorld data.

"As soon as you do that, you're down the rabbit hole," says Peter Mot of coffee equipment retailer Alternative Brewing. "Nothing is ever perfect; you're always exploring ... different ways to achieve that almighty shot."

Those nerding out at home also have a lot more time than baristas on the job to play around with new tools and methods. "In the cafe, there are factors like time, margins, costs and customers being served," says Mike Brabant, chief executive of Sydney roaster and cafe Single O.

From gadgetry to help improve your home espresso to unbridled creativity in the menus and operations of neighbourhood cafes, these are the biggest forces shaping the way we drink coffee now.

IN CAFES

INNOVATION IS BACK ON THE AGENDA

Whether it's hands-free milk frothers or hyper-specialised coffee shops focusing on one coffee bean style or region, cafes are ready to push boundaries after several years of simply surviving.

In Melbourne, Brunswick coffee roaster Disciple opened a cafe serving only black coffee in 2023, then followed it up last month with Kohi No Deshi, a destination for milk coffees, with 11 different milks/mylks on offer. Another Melbourne cafe, Four Kilo Fish, is focused on importing and roasting coffee grown in Yunnan, China, a region seldom mentioned in roastery line-ups.

Other cafes are coming up with coffee cocktails that would make a bartender proud, including a Cosmopolitan at Industry Beans that includes cascara, made from coffee cherries, the fruit that surrounds coffee beans. Sydney's Sammy Junior is the literal definition of a coffee bar, offering brews, breakfast and lunch staples by day, and cocktails, including four boozy coffee drinks, on Thursday and Friday nights.

Where speed and consistency are the aim, automated equipment is making inroads, according to Louis Schirato, senior marketing manager at Vittoria Coffee.

Pre-programmed milk dispensers can froth milk for all kinds of drinks (and the many milks now on menus) at the push of a button, freeing up baristas' hands. Automatic tampers and grinders that adjust the grind based on how shots are running through the espresso machine are also becoming more common.

Robotics are the next frontier, something already in use in Japan and the United States, says Schirato.

COOLER THAN COOL DRINKS

Iced drinks are where baristas are really unleashing their creativity. Coconut, mango, orange zest, foams, fresh spices like nutmeg, infused creams and even juice are being combined with coffee to create signature drinks: items customers

will travel to a particular cafe to try. "Gen Z is drinking less and less hot coffee," says Lachlan Ward, chief executive of St Ali, a roaster with eight cafes in Australia and overseas.

After a hot morning coffee, he says, this demographic will switch to iced drinks for their second or third cup of the day, an observation that other baristas echo. In response, St Ali has expanded its menu to eight iced drinks.

"It's a big focus for us," he says. "The Asian demographic, who are now a big part of our customer base, are all about it. And it's the younger coffee drinkers in general."

Will & Co roastery in Bondi Beach is seeing more cold brew tonics, coffee infusions and other cold drinks at the cafes it supplies.

"A lot of cafes are going beyond your standard espresso menu and looking to offer a real variety of coffee now," says Josh Passaro, head of Will & Co.

With all the extra ingredients and innovation involved, these drinks don't come cheap. Some are more than \$10 each. But it may be where prices continue to balloon because people feel they're getting something they can't make at home, no matter how fancy their equipment.

WRAPAROUND SUSTAINABILITY

"People are expecting the full hog now. It's not enough to just have a reusable cup library," says Brabant.

Single O's cafes in Sydney and Brisbane have a shelf of reusable cups for those who forgot to bring their own. Adding to the low-waste credentials, the cups are imperfect cast-offs from local ceramicists.

Beyond that, the roaster's wholesale customers in Victoria have their spent grounds collected by Reground, which sends them to community gardens, where they improve the soil, instead of remaining in landfill to emit methane. Reground has collected 14 million kilograms of coffee grounds since 2015, and says demand has grown by 40 per cent in the past 12 months alone.

"Increasingly, we're seeing coffee drinkers, members of the public and hospitality workers putting pressure on their roasters to consider the full environmental impact of their products and processes," says Fiona Parsons, from Reground's communications team.

Several cafes, including Sample in



From top: A WDT is a small tool with spikes to break up clumps in ground coffee; milk kegs are helping eliminate single-use plastic; Reground founder Ninna Larsen and director Kaitlin Reid take coffee grounds collected at the Australian Open in 2020 and add them to community gardens; coffee on tap at Single O. Photos: iStock, James Brickwood, Joe Armao, Louise Kennerley

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Main block, clockwise: Single O cafe Surry Hills; Rowena Chansiri makes an espresso yuzu fizz at Ickle Coffee in Kingsgrove, Sydney; Sammy Junior in Sydney morphs from cafe to bar at night; an Option O grinder and tools. Insets, from far left: St Ali's iced drinks; the Varia V53 coffee grinder; and Padre Coffee's mini filter coffee bags.

AT HOME

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS
 Roasters and cafes are observing increased sales of beans and brewing equipment, with Single O seeing a rise of 30 per cent on bean sales after the pandemic years. In 2023 alone, Padre's online coffee sales increased 24 per cent. But in-cafe cup sales are not dropping dramatically.

Customers are supplementing their daily visit to the cafe with a second or third coffee at home, according to cafe owners. "People are definitely having a look at where they're spending their money. Buying a bag of coffee to brew at home is a more economical option a lot of the time," says Folker. "As people realised that coffee is not difficult to make - it can be difficult to make excellent, but it's not difficult to make - they saw how much more cost-effective it is to make coffee at home," says Reuben Mardan.

Most Australians don't want to compromise on taste, though, so they're seeking high-quality beans sold and used in their local cafe. Professionals aren't fazed by this growth in home baristas.

"We don't see it as a threat. We see it as an expansion of more specialty coffee consumers in the marketplace," says Brabant.

At Padre's "espresso 101" classes in Queensland, NSW and Victoria, Folker sees the same phenomenon playing out. "They're wanting to come and learn how to maximise the coffee that they're buying from the people that roast it and brew it."

THE COFFEE TOOLKIT IS NOW A WHOLE TOOLBOX

Thought you just needed an espresso machine to make coffee at home? Not any more. The most committed home baristas have drawers full of brewing accessories to achieve the holy grail: consistently good coffee, every time.

Most common among espresso drinkers are WDTs (Weiss distribution tools), which look a little like a shaving brush except instead of soft strands, it has thin needles that you push into the coffee you have freshly ground into your basket to break up clumps. Next you might reach for your distributor, which creates an even bed of coffee.

You'll tamp (press) it, perhaps with a calibrated tamper that applies exactly the right amount of

pressure, removing any human aberrations.

It's all in aid of the most even extraction of those espresso grounds as possible.

So is all that kit worth it? Some WDT tools, for example, start at \$50, but there are other examples on the market for \$350. Plenty of coffee figureheads have put them to the test and concluded they do improve your brew.

GRINDING IT DOWN

But, if it's a toss up between all of these tools and an excellent grinder, choose the grinder every time, says Mot of Alternative Brewing. "If you're going to look at upgrading any particular part of the set-up to get a better drink, improving the grinder is ultimately going to get you a better result."

He says there's been an "explosion" in the number of grinders on the market, with more innovation in this area than, say, espresso machines. There are now machines with interchangeable burrs (the things that grind your beans), which allow customisation based on whether you're brewing espresso or filter, and speed adjustments. A faster grind often creates a more uniform particle size.

People have become obsessed with the level of control a new-generation grinder can give them over their daily cup.

Coffee influencers will show off their matte black grinders, which look like microscopes, and are just as precise. Yet despite price tags as high as \$2500, grinders are showing the biggest sales across all categories at Alternative Brewing.

But all those accessories, from WDTs to special sieves that remove tiny particles from your pour-over grounds, are a cheaper way to achieve consistency. "Instead of opting for an upgrade to a more capable, and generally more expensive grinder or machine, all of the previously mentioned devices do help with consistency," says Mot. Grinders will continue to keep coming down in price, though.

AIRTIGHT STORAGE

Newsflash: the fridge is out, vacuum is in. Airtight coffee canisters with a vacuum seal are a new common sight on the benches of brew nerds. They do the all-important work of making sure moisture, odours, air and heat stay away from your beans, which begin to deteriorate as soon as they leave the roastery.

The best vacuum-sealed containers are opaque, as light also affects the quality of beans. An outlay of \$20 to \$30 to prolong their flavour seems worthwhile.



Surry Hills and St Peters, say the use of reusable cups has crept back up, after the pandemic put a halt to the habit.

Brabant says he's also seeing cafes introducing recycled plastic cups; adopting compostable packaging, especially for coffee bags; and refurbishing their coffee machines, rather than replacing them with something new.

SPECIALIST COFFEE MEETS CONVENIENCE

Out-of-home coffee products - coffee that can be made on the run - are taking flight, as people's lives incorporate more travel.

Padre, a roaster with cafes in NSW, Victoria and Queensland, released its Day Dripper coffee bags a year ago, a convenient mini filter that needs no more than hot water to deliver a quality pour-over. "They have taken off," says Georgia Folker, head of trade and retail marketing.

They join similar products, such as Single O's Parachutes and Sample's bags and drippers, whose sales have also been climbing.

Brabant says: "Even when you go camping with friends these days, someone will pull out a specialty [coffee] product that you can just add water to and everyone will appreciate it... instant won't do."



COFFEE LOVERS GO BACK TO BLACK

When Single O opened its Surry Hills cafe 20 years ago, black coffee sales were 1-2 per cent of the total. "Now it's like 25 per cent of all coffee we sell," says Brabant.

In fact, he'd say that at least 50 per cent of the coffees his team makes today are not dairy-based, thanks to the rise of alternative milks and a growing appreciation for black coffee.

Sample Coffee's orders show a similar split, or perhaps even 60-40 in favour of black and alt milk drinks. "People are realising how delicious [black coffee] can be when it's done right," says owner Reuben Mardan.

Single O's cafes have filter coffee on tap, meaning a customer can choose the coffee they want after reading about its flavour profile on a little badge attached to each tap.

Will & Co's John Passaro has seen customers who normally drink flat whites gravitate towards the novelty of their coffee taps to order a cold brew.

Schirato of Vittoria says demand for tap systems is on the rise.

"It keeps things interesting for your regulars, it's easy for staff to brew - it ticks a lot of boxes," he says.



PRICES TO STABILISE - MOSTLY

While 2023 could be remembered as the year of bill shock, this year might have better news, at least for coffee.

The tail-end of pandemic supply chain issues and rapid interest rate rises are most likely behind us, and the International Coffee Organisation forecast that 2023-2024 global coffee production would increase 5.8 per cent on the previous year, which may also help ease prices.

Industry figures believe that more steep price hikes on flat whites are unlikely this year. Brabant forecasts rises on "premium drinks", such as creative iced coffees and super small-batch single origins, rather than "core drinks".

Sample in Sydney will make regular, incremental price increases each year to reflect rising costs, rather than huge price increases every few years, which they've done in the past. For example, a 5 per cent increase would equate to 25¢ on a \$5 coffee. "I believe it's a bit fairer for the customer. It's not a shock," says Mardan.

