Why decaf counts

Decaffeinated coffee's bad reputation is cooling thanks to new technology, better beans and an appetite for coffee around the clock. **Jennie Milsom** finds that, finally, there's a buzz about decaf

Have you tried decaf coffee recently? And do you know what the beans were, or how they were decaffeinated? If you have been deterred by stories of stale beans and cheap chemical processes, fear not – within the speciality coffee industry, decaf is emerging as a premium product, its appeal radiating from the caffeine sensitive to coffee lovers seeking deliciousness from dawn to dusk. And, as coffee shop owner and coffee lover, I think this is good news.

According to Allegra Research and Insights, 6% of us would choose decaf coffee in coffee shops. But it's the younger generation who are increasingly opting for it. "I think we are in the early stages of a decaf renaissance," says Guy Wilmot of online retailer Decadent Decaf Coffee Co. "Decaf was once the preserve of the over 50s, but younger people don't remember the stigma surrounding decaf and have an open mind about it."

So what's the secret to great decaf? EU guidelines stipulate residual caffeine cannot exceed 0.1% – that's around 5mg per 6oz brewed decaf compared to 100-150mg in caffeinated coffee. Decaffeinated in its unroasted state, the trick is to extract the caffeine without destroying character.

Many speciality roasters favour the Swiss Water® process, undertaken at a decaf plant near Vancouver, Canada. Caffeinated beans are soaked in green coffee extract made from tasty coffee components and the caffeine is filtered out. As with all decaffeination, the water used is crucial. "This water comes from rainfall and snow in mountainous areas," says Swiss Water's Marisol Pinzon. "The supply is pristine, natural and protected." Decadent Decaf sells exclusively Swiss Water decaf to its UK-based customers. "It is consistently good. Some of their decafs are truly astonishing," Wilmot says.

Other roasters and importers are fans of the Mexican Mountain Water process. Speciality coffee merchants Mercanta have worked with them for years and are eagerly awaiting the arrival of high-scoring Nueva Linda Mexican Mountain Water Decaf.

Meanwhile, decaffeinating thousands of tonnes per year is CR3, a decaf plant in Germany that applies carbon dioxide under pressure to extract caffeine, a process known as Supercritical CO2. Like Swiss Water, it is chemical free and certified organic. Roasters Volcano Coffee Works collaborated with Freeman Trading and sent their single origin Peru – the coffee in their Fullsteam Espresso – to CR3 having previously used the Swiss Water process. "Decaf can be an afterthought. We felt it was an area we could improve on," says Joe McElhinney, Volcano's Director of Coffee. When their first batch returned for roasting, McElhinney found he could develop the CO2 decaf a little further and pull out more sweetness than its Swiss Water equivalent. They cupped the same coffee pre-decaf, decaffed with CO2 and with Swiss Water and were thrilled with the results of the CO2. Since 2013, Square Mile Coffee Roasters have been using CR3's Supercritical CO2 method. CEO James Hoffmann recalls a coffee that changed his view on decaf in Stumptown, Portland, a decade ago. "I was genuinely shocked. It made me realise decaf doesn't have to mean compromising on flavour, so from the get-go with Square Mile we wanted to make something that didn't taste like decaf."

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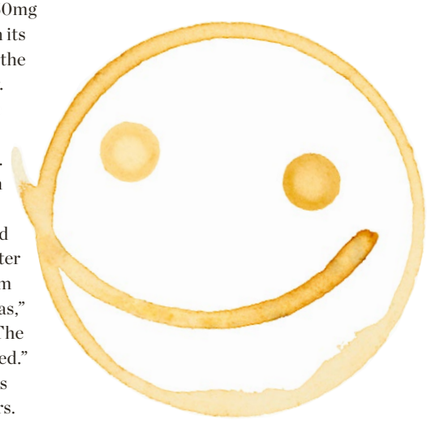

In Colombia, Sugar Cane is an emerging decaf method, celebrated as having "the most positive flavour" by Has Bean's Stephen Leighton, a Sugar Cane convert since cupping it there a few years ago. "There was a coffee on the table that wasn't natural, but had some of the hallmarks of a natural. But it was really delicious." He was amazed when it was revealed as a decaf.

Colombia's sugar and coffee industries are working hand in hand. The Sugar Cane process works by fermenting molasses from locally grown sugar with ethanol, which is then mixed with acetic acid. This acts as an adhesive to extract the caffeine. Because this process is used only on Colombian beans – shipping into the country is tricky – it eliminates food miles to far-flung decaf plants. Other roasters are catching on to Colombian decaf. Alan Tomlins of Brighton's Small Batch Coffee Roasters says they've been impressed with the cup quality and ecological benefits of using a non-chemical process at origin. Climpson & Sons offer Bella Vista from Huila, Colombia, a decaf that promises "dark chocolate, cola and cherry flavours".

Another shift is that higher grade coffees are being selected for decaf. Better beans, combined with advanced decaffeinating technology, are giving tastier decaf in the cup. "In the past, importers have used decaf as a way of using up old crop coffee," says Simon Clark, head roaster at Climpson & Sons. "This has probably contributed to its reputation as somewhat inferior."

Roasting decaf presents challenges as the beans' colour and density have been altered. "It's a much tougher one to manage. Decafs take heat a lot faster," says McElhinney. The beans look darker, which can be harder to judge when roasting – and brewing. "Don't freak out if there's a little oil on the surface," says Hoffman. "It does not mean it is dark-roasted, just that the decaffeination process has made the coffee more porous, so it is easier for oils to escape from the insides of the bean."

As with anything, you'll only get out what you put in. "Better beans, better decaf," says Mercanta's Stephen Hurst. "Generally, a good quality green can reveal a surprising decaf if non-chemical processes are used and the beans are in good order before sending them to be decaffed." If you've avoided decaf from bitter experience you might be missing out on drinking amazing coffees all day long without the night-time jitters. "What's the worst that can happen?" says Hoffman. "You can try a new coffee and not spend any of your caffeine allowance for the day. It's risk free!"

PHOTOS: ISTOCK