

STORY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

TRUE BREW

Coffee enters a 'Golden Era' thanks to different types of beans and advanced processes



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE
Black Ivory Coffee Company founder Blake Dinkin (right) feeds an elephant a coffee bean mixture at an elephant camp in northern Thailand. It takes 15 to 30 hours for the elephant to digest the beans. Then they are plucked from their dung and washed and roasted.

Coffee, or the way we know it now, dates back to the 10th century. Back then, caffeine seekers weren't strolling out to their local cafe to get their fix exactly as they want it, or ordering packaged beans ready for hand-grinding from Amazon.com. These early lovers of the buzz were the ancestors of the Oromo ethnic tribe from Ethiopia who noticed the stimulation associated with the coffee plant.

However, it was really the Sufi monasteries of Yemen in the 15th century that properly started to explore coffee as a daily ritual – particularly enjoying its perk giving intoxication during spiritual rituals. Since these early days, the processes, the flavour and the expressions of coffee have changed dramatically

and we are at what we might call the "Golden Era" of coffee. As Steve McCurry wrote in his book *From These Hands: A Journey Along The Coffee Trail*, "[Coffee] is about how we live, about how people interact with one another".

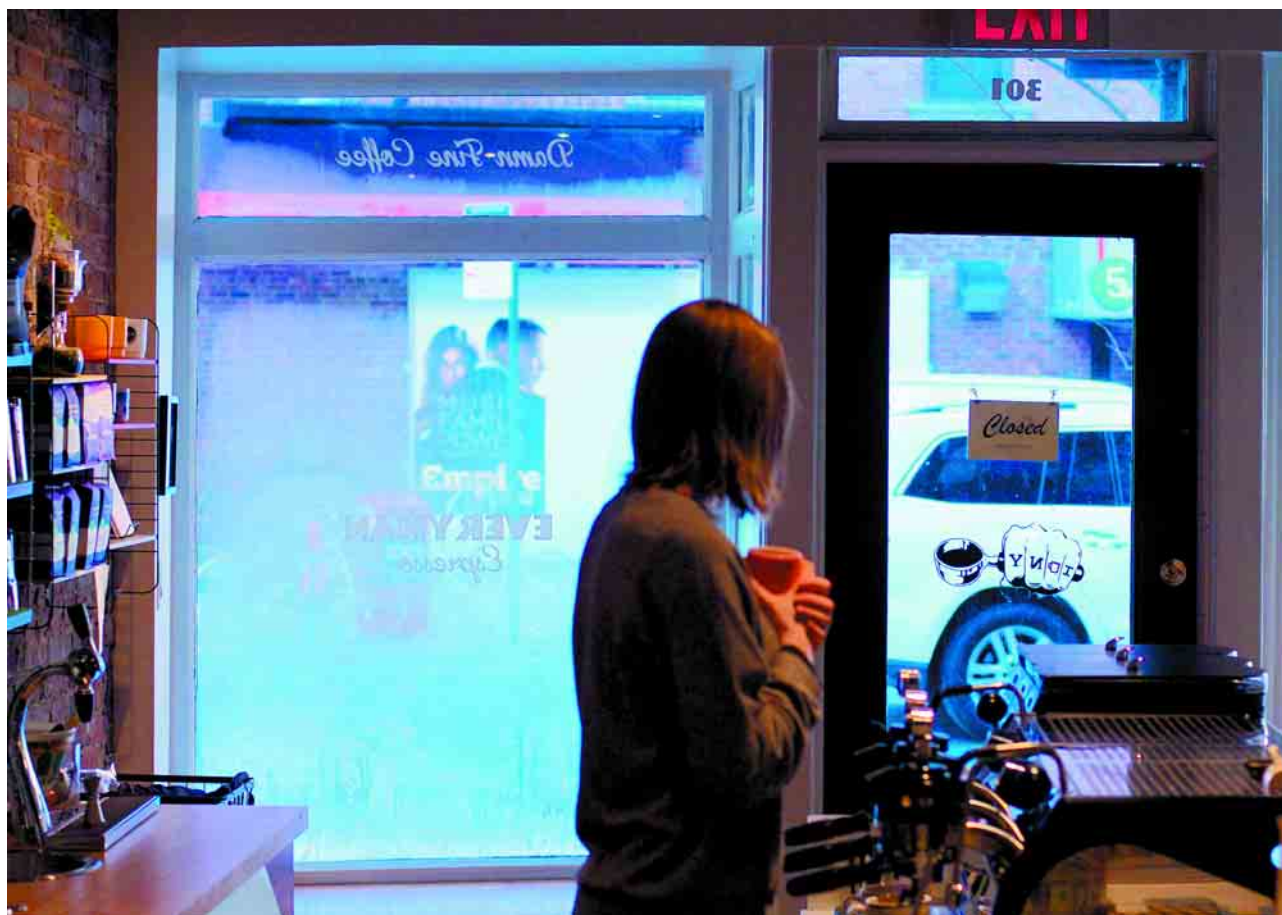
"We're in a moment of coffee history where coffee has become higher quality and tastes better than ever before," says Sam Penix, owner of Everyman Espresso in New York. Penix, who often consults with the coffee squad of the world, says the third wave of coffee has been about quality where the "hard work of every player of the supply chain is taken into account" and the next wave will be about "quality on a bigger scale".

According to Alberto Bermúdez, owner of Café Unido at the American Trade Hotel in Panama City, "Starbucks helped the first wave of coffee – a sort of gateway drug". And suddenly coffee wasn't just a watery or overheated milky mess that so many cafes and coffee shops were

A place to chat coffee. Unido, a proud Panama craft roaster, offers its gesha varietal in the American Trade Hotel.



PHOTO: LANNY HUANG



WE'RE IN A MOMENT OF COFFEE HISTORY WHERE COFFEE TASTES BETTER THAN EVER **SAM PENIX OF EVERYMAN ESPRESSO**

ABOVE LEFT
Everyman Espresso in New York serves different varieties of coffee. Owner Sam Penix often consults with the coffee squad of the world.

ABOVE RIGHT
Coffee bean cherries growing on the mountains of Panama

RIGHT
Invented in 1941, the Chemex removes coffee oils as it runs through a thick filter and into the glass base.

selling across the world. Since then, coffee just keeps improving with better growing techniques and production facilities – and, of course, tastes.

As Bermúdez, who likes to call roasting “spiritual”, describes, “the coffee industry now has space for everyone” – from the behemoths opening multiple stores globally to small guys such as Unido who set their focus on the cycle that gives back to the community with every hand that passes the beans.

“In the 1950s, coffee became popular everywhere in the United States along with brewing methods using glass contraptions,” Penix says. In particular, flavour became more important but what lacked then was the science around coffee itself.

“Today, we have knowledge about varieties and the processing from washing to drying to roasting,” Penix explains. For instance the gesha varietal, one of the most expensive coffees sold in the world today, started off as just a plant that was spread among the other coffee lots, after it came across from Ethiopia to Costa Rica.

In actual fact, the gesha journey is pure romance. Bermúdez tells the story of how Francisco Serracin brought the gesha to Panama where the plant mutated with the unique microclimate with the supportive Peterson family. In 2004, at the Best of Panama event in Panama City, the coffee snobs and connoisseurs discovered gesha. Today, it is used by baristas across the world for competitions and the prestigious Cup of Excellence.

“Peterson had managed to produce a coffee so incredible that its mere existence caused a global shockwave that has seen the gesha varietal shift its image from failed experiment to a symbol of hope for the hundreds more miracle varieties that are still out there, growing undiscovered in their deep green tropical forests,” says Jono Le Feuvre, co-owner of Rosetta Roastery in Cape Town. Until these are found, the family-run Hacienda La Esmeralda estate





LEFT
Coffee beans are laid out for drying. Climate plays an important role in the production of premium coffee beans.

in Panama is the go-to for single-varietal coffees – and it will cost you around HK\$750 for a bag of beans. “The first sip of gesha is a smile,” Bermúdez says. The jasmine flavour of the bean dominates and then there is a beautiful Bergamot second layer that floats towards the drinker. “The green tip gesha that is grown 460 metres above sea level carries the florals and also gives off a mandarin zest punch,” he says.

The secret is the altitude where the warmth of day and chill of night can slow down the maturation or ripening of the cherry that then locks the sugars into the seed. “If it’s done right, the gesha is a magical fluorescent with heightened acidity,” Penix says.

There are other coffee trends in the world. “Kopi Lawak, or the seeds of coffee berries eaten and defecated by the Asian palm civet, is expensive and eye-catching but based purely on trend and not on quality,” Penix says.

Blake Dinkin, the founder of the Black Ivory Coffee Company based in Bangkok, has bigger plans – fermentation in the elephant stomach. He says that elephants have “stomachs that act as natural fermentation tanks: just like grapes would sit in a tank to make wine”. It takes up to 70 hours for the elephants to digest and due to the high amount of cellulose consumed by the animals, the coffee is much sweeter with notes of cocoa, spice and malt.

“It’s almost tea-like,” Dinkin says. Although Kopi Lawak is under scrutiny for the mishandling of the civets, Black Ivory works with sanctuary elephants that are not caged but taken from the wild and under veterinary supervision. Not only does Dinkin ensure the elephants are treated with care, his workers are paid more than the market rate, and 8 per cent of sales are returned to the community. The produce is restricted to 150 kg of the best cherries he can find – available in five-star hotels and Michelin-star restaurants.

Fifth-generation El Salvadorian coffee producer Aida Battle is changing the game as she re-establishes the vital connection between roaster and producer and offers new fermentation and drying options to her clientele. According to Penix, Aida gives a nod to cultures. “You can have beans in Ethiopian style, but the processing [fermentation and drying] is done according to [Aida’s] preferences”.

Climate change might be the bigger reshape of the industry and might potentially devastate the entire business. “Every year is hotter and drier,” Bermúdez says. “Lower altitudes are most affected and we have to just go higher and higher. And then there is the deforestation issues between Colombia and Panama – but luckily local fincas are implementing their own strategies to help.” So if ever there was a time to drink coffee, it is right now – since we don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. **T**



TASTE FOR ADVENTURE

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A PREMIUM COFFEE EXPERIENCE

Copa Airlines (copaair.com) fly directly from New York City to Panama City twice daily. Once you arrive in the vibrancy that is Panama City, one place to stay would be the American Trade Hotel (americantradehotel.com, pictured) that opened in 2013 in the old part of town dubbed Casco Viejo. The hotel serves the finest Hacienda La Esmeralda Diamond Mountain coffees at Café Unido. Ask for Alberto and perhaps he’ll be willing to take you to some of the plantations (fincas) out of town on the dormant volcanoes dotted around the country, all the while getting more than just caffeine.