



# Chronicle

A Publication of the Specialty Coffee Association of America

Attempting to please a customer with volume rather than taste takes one foot out of the specialty coffee business and plants it firmly in "commodity-think."

## THE Supersizing of Specialty Coffee:



## IS BIGGER REALLY BETTER?

by Mike Ferguson

In the distant future, archeologists will dig us up, looking for clues they can decipher in their studied hindsight as indications of the decline of western civilization. In the same way that we reflect on the Romans and wonder why they couldn't see that feeding people to lions was not a sign of good things to come, historians will one day look back at us and think, "All you can eat? Double Big Gulp? Super-size it? A 24-ounce coffee?" The writing, they'll say, was on the menu.

Those who study consumer psychology call this phenomenon "portion distortion." I call it a world gone mad. In the 1950s, a medium popcorn at the movies contained three cups of popcorn; today it's 16 cups. Vending machines (three million of them) that once

dispensed 6.5-ounce bottles and then 12-ounce cans, now spit out 20-ounce bottles. And consider this: Over the last two decades, the average circumference of a restaurant dinner plate has gone from 10 inches to 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches, the average fast food hamburger patty has grown from two ounces to four, the average bag of French fries has swelled from two ounces to five ounces, and the average size of a candy bar has increased four times since 1970. And how is it that the same recipe for Nestlé's Toll House chocolate chip cookies that listed a yield of 100 in 1949 now lists a yield of only 60? It is the same madness that causes someone to fill a 24-ounce cup with coffee. Whatever happened to coming back for another cookie or a second cup?

If I were king, I would declare a large coffee to be now and forever 12 ounces. Anything beyond 12 ounces is what I would call inelegant. And that is, in essence, my entire argument against the inroads super-sizing has made into the coffee industry. Few things in coffee are as elegant as a demitasse cup filled with 1.5 ounces of properly prepared espresso, or the perfect triumvirate of a six-ounce cappuccino. A 16-ounce cup is simply unbecoming, a 20-ounce cup ridiculous and a 24-ounce cup absurd. There are wild tales of convenience store cups that are even larger. These are the inelegant ounces and harbingers of the ordinary, the commonplace and commodification. Each ounce beyond 12 has less to do with specialty coffee and more to do with concepts that fit uneasily into the specialty experience: convenience, value marketing, bigger is better, up-selling, volume, and demand-driven.

Whatever happened to the truly small cup of coffee to go? Twenty years ago, a regular coffee to go came in a six-ounce cup with a little paper handle. If it was good enough then, why not now? Chances are most of the coffee mugs in your kitchen, when filled to a point where you can walk and read this article at the same time without spilling, hold around seven ounces. And if you like to pick up old coffee cups at thrift stores or have inherited coffee cups from your grandmother, they probably hold only four to five ounces. Seventy percent of coffee is consumed in the home, but for some reason, leaving our house requires a doubling or tripling of our coffee serving size.

The most common excuse for super-sizing is convenience. Customers often demand larger cups because they commute long distances and only want to make one stop for coffee. Fair enough. But if as a retailer you buy into this, you're saying that customers buy coffee from you because of your selection of cup sizes, and if you don't offer anything above 12 ounces they will buy coffee from one of your competitors who provides 16- or even 20-ounce cups. But is your competitor's coffee as good as yours? This is the same thinking that causes retailers to compete on price rather than quality. Customers expect larger cups because they've been trained to expect larger cups. But attentive retailers are perfectly capable of encouraging customers to concentrate on the quality rather than the quantity, making them more loyal in the process. It really comes down to how much you trust your coffee and its preparation. Your customer might finish his coffee while he's still in the car rather than after he's reached his desk, but he may not even notice because he was so satisfied. Attempting to please a customer with volume rather than taste takes

- RETAIL SECTOR REPORT: COFFEEHOUSES
- COFFEE BIBLIOGRAPHY REVIEW
- MEMBERS WRITE
- PHOTO ESSAY: ROASTER'S GUILD RETREAT

...AND MORE

## INSIDE...

# Coffee Bibliography Review

by Tony Wild

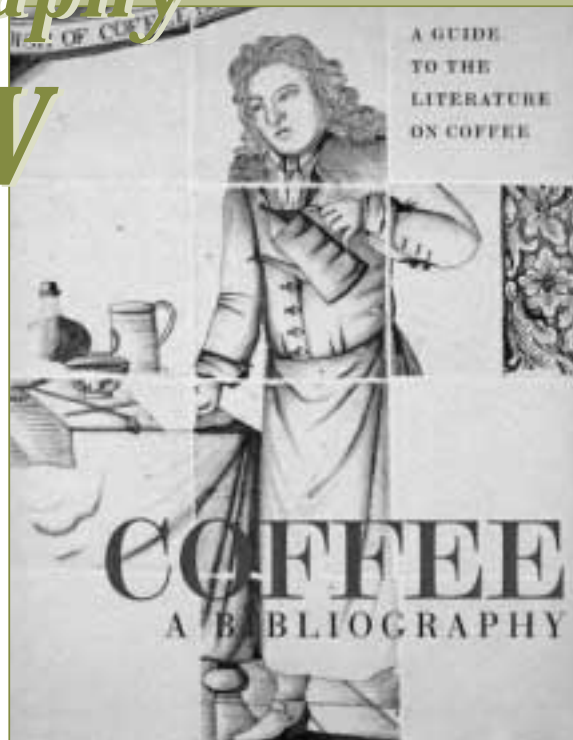
**COFFEE: A Bibliography. A Guide to the Literature on Coffee.**

Compiled by Richard von Hünersdorff. Introduction by Professor Ralph Hattox.

London: Hünersdorff 2002. 2 volumes. 1687 pages. With over 300 illustrations, some in color.

This bibliography of coffee—effectively a comprehensive listing of past publications on the subject—even to the most enthusiastic coffeeman appears to be the sort of book he might expect to find on the august shelves of the reference section of the Library of Congress rather than a must-buy for every specialty coffee business as a valuable commercial resource. But as the coffee market further polarizes between the high price specialty sector and the Brazil/Vietnam axis of low cost bulk mediocrity, increasingly the pressure is on for specialty producers and roasters to justify the claims they make for their coffees' supposed superiority. Whereas the historical provenance of a particular coffee used to be something that could be frequently presented to uncritical buyers and consumers without fear of being gainsaid, nowadays much of the marketing of a premium coffee depends upon the authenticity of what is said about it. Cup quality, specificity, selectivity and environmental practices are all vital ingredients in a successful marketing mix, but so too increasingly is history. If the claims made for a coffee's history are disputable, doubtful, or just plain wrong, it can seriously damage its prospects in the marketplace.

With mainstream coffees it doesn't really make much difference—the FNC's spurious claim that coffee was introduced to Colombia by Jesuits in the 16th century has hardly dented the popularity of Juan Valdez, despite not a shred of evidence that this is the historical case. Likewise, the industry as a whole endlessly recycles as gospel truth the story of Kaldi and his dancing goats, although this is almost certainly a coffee house story concocted in the 18th century to explain the origins of coffee drinking; however, no long term damage to the credibility of the trade has resulted. But when an entire marketing campaign such as that recently launched by the Jamaica Coffee Board for "Wallenford Estate TM" hangs on the alarming proposition that a coffee doesn't actually need to come from the well-known historical estate after which it is named, then the specialty trade should sit up and take notice. While the trade is gradually



embracing the idea of strict "appellation control" in the manner of the French wine industry, to do so properly it must start to treat its own history with respect. Adulterated history should be viewed by the trade as seriously as adulterated coffees.

Hünersdorff's monumental two volume book is an invaluable tool for raising historical coffee consciousness. In the past most buyers who take care over historical claims have used William Ukers' *All About Coffee* as their bible. First published in 1922, it remained unsurpassed in its meticulous research and attention to detail. However, much coffee has flowed under the historical bridge since then, and little by little the picturesque tales of Kaldi, Babu Budan, Gabriel de Clieu and others have been discredited. *COFFEE: A Bibliography*, as well as describing volumes, papers and journals, frequently quotes at some length the relevant passages of the original works. This is particularly the case with coffee's early history and discovery by European travelers, and clearly establishes, for example, that there was widespread participation by Europeans, especially the English East India Company, in the coffee trade of the

*Continued on page 5...*

*Supersizing...  
Continued from page 1.*

one foot out of the specialty coffee business and plants it firmly in "commodity-think."

I challenge the argument for convenience in hopes that your coffee is so good that your customers will take it however they can get it. Maybe it will be so good that they'll make room in their day to stop and enjoy it in a porcelain cup while sitting at a table, and then order a second for the road.

Thirty years ago, McDonald's reluctantly increased the size of their large order of French fries to 3.5 ounces (smaller than a medium order today). The reluctance came from founder Ray Kroc, who believed that if people wanted more French fries, they should buy two bags. I agree. But "value marketing" is seductive to both retailers and their customers.

I purchased my first 32-ounce soda along with some friends at an ice cream parlor 25 years ago. We thought of it as a joke, a novelty. People stared at us as we walked down the street with our obscenely large cups. We thought it was hilarious. Who would ever drink so much soda? We could have shared one among us. But within a few years, 32-ounce cups began to proliferate through convenience stores, eventually finding their way into fast food locations where they were identified on the menu as the "best value." It's hard to deny. For only a few cents more, you can get twice as much beverage. Never mind that what I wanted, and what had always worked for me in the past, was a 16- or 20-ounce beverage. For retailers, the cost of adding a larger size is small compared to the added cost to the consumer. To consumers, it's only 30 or 40 cents, so why not? It's because we consume food and beverages in relation to what is available and not in relation to what we need. Unlike babies and toddlers, who stop eating or drinking when they are full, adults in a society heavily reliant on meals prepared and served by others depend on visual cues as much as the "feeling" of being full. The once impossibly large 32-ounce soda is now a medium drink in most convenience stores. The six-ounce coffee to go is extinct in most regions of the country for no other reason

than because we were told we needed to drink from larger cups.

But we don't have to serve coffee in giant cups any more than our customers need to drink from them. Nothing about this evolution in portion size is appropriate to specialty coffee. We do not roast coffee continuously in factories, turning out three or four variations on a theme. We roast in batches. Maybe some of our batches are big, but even they are distinct in countless ways from the coffee that went before and the coffee that will come after. Most specialty coffee retailers still prepare one espresso drink at a time. Drip coffee must be ground correctly and measured precisely. Everything about the proper preparation of specialty coffee, from the day it was born on the tree to the day it is poured, speaks to the singularity of every cup worthy of the name. To equate value with volume degrades not only our product but the sophistication of our customers, a sophistication that helped build the specialty coffee segment. We must trust both the coffees and the customers.

I had thought I would conclude with the idea that we should look to our friends in the specialty tea industry for inspiration on cup size and ignore what happens in convenience stores and fast food chains as irrelevant to our interests. But I was presented with dramatic evidence recently that we need not look beyond our own industry for inspiration. The best barista in the world gathered not long ago in Boston to compete for the title of international champion. They each prepared espressos and cappuccinos with great skill and attention to detail. When it came to the signature drinks, not one prepared anything larger than 12 ounces. In fact, many of the signature drinks were less than eight ounces, and they were some of the most elegant ounces I have ever seen.

*This article first appeared in the 2003 Coffee Almanac from Fresh Cup magazine and is reprinted here with permission. You can visit Fresh Cup at [www.freshcup.com](http://www.freshcup.com) or call 1-800-868-5866.*