

The Evolution of Coffee in France:
**Expanding the Culture &
Palate of the Consumer**





In the past 10 years, there has been an evolution of the coffee culture in France. Coffee once consumed only at home is now being requested in cafés, star restaurants and in the new wave of coffee shops. French consumers are also increasingly demanding better-quality coffee.

By Anne-Marie Hardie



In a country known for its exquisite cuisine, romantic ambiance and fine wine, France has had a narrow understanding of coffee. For the majority, coffee was a simple beverage consumed as part of a breakfast (either as a filtered coffee or a *café au lait*) or in the form of “*la petite noir*,” a bitter espresso drink.

“I’ve been trying and trying to help clients valorize coffee, give value to coffee and be different,” said Michael McCauley, quality and product development director, Café Richard, Paris, France. “It has taken over 10 years for people to realize that coffee is much more than just a black drink in a cup...” Café Richard is a roaster, retailer and “educator.” It has eight retail outlets coffee outlets where it sells its own brand of coffee including single serve. Café Richard also has a school for both coffee (*Academie du Café*) and tea (*Univers thé*).

It’s ironic that a country often dismissed as having “bad coffee” was one of

the first sources of Arabica. Coffee has been a part of French history for centuries. In fact, it is believed that a vast majority of Arabica coffee plants throughout the world descended from France.

In 1714, a coffee plant was given as a gift to King Louis XIV of France by the Mayor of Amsterdam. King Louis XIV requested that the gift be planted in the Royal Botanical Garden in Paris. In 1723, Gabriel de Clieu, a naval officer, received a seedling from the plant and brought it to Martinique. In this region, the seedling thrived and it is believed to be the source of over 18 million coffee trees in the island of Martinique. Stock from this seedling travelled creating French Arabica descendants worldwide including the Caribbean, South and Central America. Coffee and its dimensions were both embraced and raved about in France where it was used both as a beverage and for medicinal purposes.

But perhaps, it was Charles Maurice

de Talleyrand-Perigord, Former Prime Minister of the French Republic, who best described the French perception of coffee praising it as “Black as the devil, hot as hell, pure as an angel, sweet as love.” This phrase is being revitalized by Café Richard, Gennevilliers, France, as a slogan for their Rouge Richard. During this time period, France or at least the upper society in France, recognized the range of possibilities in this rich beverage. So how did a country that was once the source of one of the first Arabica plants become associated with bad coffee?

Robusta and France’s Recent Coffee Past

Traditionally, coffee was consumed in France in part for its caffeine and in a part as a digestive. Taste was not a factor. Up until about 10 years ago most of the French were unaware of the dimensions of taste that coffee could offer. Robusta was readily available to both the French

roasters and coffee manufacturers due to France's proximity to the colonies in Africa. France's coffee, similar to a lot of Southern Europe, was traditionally composed from these beans. Ignorant of the possibilities of coffee, the majority of the French population accepted this bitter drink as the "normal" taste of coffee.

Next to water, coffee is the second most-consumed beverage in France—88 percent of the population drinks coffee at breakfast. Antoine Netien, owner of Coutume Café, Paris, France, and one of the individuals responsible for developing France's coffee culture said that most of the French consume a drip coffee either in a traditional filtered machine or in a single cup at breakfast. During the remainder of the day, the French drink "bitter watery espresso" (most of the time with sugar). Traditionally, coffee to the French is simply coffee, "Le petit noir" (the espresso drink) is seen as both a digestive drink and a stimulant. Coutume Café is a coffee house brand with two locations in Paris and the intent to expand elsewhere in France in the near future.

Unfortunately, this narrow understanding of coffee and its nuances has given France's coffee culture a bit of a bad rap. "I am really frustrated with the reputation of coffee in France... You can drink bad coffee everywhere," said McCauley. "My goal is to make coffee in France to have the same reputation as wine and cuisine."

Patrick Masson, national coordinator for the French chapter of the SCAE, credits the education efforts of several industries such as the SCAE, Comité Français du Café, and roasters by themselves or through those types of associations, for shifting the coffee culture in France. Due to the efforts of these associations, Café Richard and several other big players in the industry, including the SCAE and Café Belco, a green coffee supplier, France's exposure to quality coffee has expanded dramatically.

Conferences such as the World Roasters Summit and the SCAE sponsored World of Coffee (both take place in Nice this June—Café Richard is a sponsor) and cupping competitions are also helping increase the awareness of the pos-

sibilities for coffee. However, one of the more interesting players responsible for expanding the knowledge of the French consumer was the single serve market, mainly Nespresso.

The Return to Quality Coffee

France naturally lends itself to the single-serve industry with the majority of individuals still consuming their coffee at home. "The main development in 2011 was the explosion in Nespresso-compatible pods," reported Euromonitor, London. "Coffee by the cup is considered in France to be a quick and easy way to enjoy high-quality coffee at home." In 2011, the single-serve industry expanded in France to include several other large players including Kraft, Malongo and Sara Lee.

The single-serve industry eased French consumers into the world of specialty coffee by encouraging customers to select their pods based on aroma, intensity and cup size. French consumers began

to recognize good coffee and the industry began to see an increased interest for quality coffee in other areas of the industry. Customers began requesting quality beans and beverages both inside and outside the home, in particular at their cafés and local bars. "After all of these years, I'm beginning to see a real change in the types and forms of coffee requested," said McCauley. "It's always been so frustrating for me to see how well we do in cuisine and wine, and coffee has always been put on the back burner. Now we are seeing such an interest." Both the large roasters, like Café Richard and the micro artisanal roasters are experiencing this increased demand for quality coffee.

Artisan Roasters help Expand the French Coffee Palette

According to Angel Barrera, Café Belco, Mérignac, France, the culture of artisan roasting in France is very old and specific. In fact, some of his clients abroad share stories



Businesses such as Café Richard, which is a roaster, retailer and coffee academy based in Paris, are helping to improve the quality of coffee and passion for good coffee in France.

The coffee world



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of how they learned the original art of roasting from France. Artisan roasting is a part of the French culture, these individuals hand craft their brews to create the perfect blend.

Café Belco has seen a transformation in the type of coffee beans demanded from its artisan roasters. "France has an old history of using coffee from their colonies. Historically, what was used was mainly Robusta," said Barrera. "That is changing, at Café Belco we now work with 80-90 percent Arabica, so it's apparent that consumer demand for quality coffee is growing."

Café Belco offers 40-45 origin coffees to over 650 artisan roasters throughout France. On average, these micro roasters will work with about two to five pounds of coffee per year. Today, Café Belco services both the micro roasters and larger artisans who may produce up to 400 to 500 pounds of coffee per year.

New Wave: Coffee Shops and an Expanded Palate

Quality coffee is becoming an essential part of the French café experience. French clien-



Café Belco offers 40-45 origin coffees to more than 650 artisan roasters throughout France.

tele want more from both their coffee and the overall café experience. McCauley has seen this shift in both the demands from the French clientele and from those involved in the coffee industry.

"Eight to 10 years ago, the only people asking for training were bigger groups who had training budgets," said McCauley. "Now we are seeing more and more independent people who want to know how

they can improve coffee quality. The coffee culture in France is really at the beginning of something very exciting, and we are going to see a lot of changes in the next few years."

In addition to its eight boutiques, Café Richard has been highly involved with both accrediting and educating the French community on the vast possibilities of coffee. It offers its customers several options in training from brew bar methods (slow

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Café Belco (above) offers coffee training events to roasters, chefs and the general public in France.

roasting) to creating a sommelier-like relationship between the blend and food.

“Thirty years ago, the average French person didn’t know much about wine, and the variety of grapes,” said McCauley. “We are just now starting to gain the same knowledge with coffee. And people are finding that correlation between wine and coffee easy to understand.”

Both Café Richard through its Academie du Café and Café Belco

through its Univer Café offer hundreds of coffee training events annually to roasters, chefs and the general public.

One of the new trends that Barrera sees is an increased interest not only for the blend but how it’s brewed. Customers are now asking for single-state coffee, honey roasted and other advanced techniques that were previously only seen in the United States. In response to this demand, coffee shops, like Coutume Café are now

offering coffee menus that connect the blend to the brewing machine whether it’s a Chemex, AeroPress or Hario.

Netien has also noticed this shift both in the education and the coffee palette of their French consumers. “Our top-selling coffees are very soft single origins, like FAF Brazilian coffees or sweet Ethiopians,” said Netien. “I’m always surprised, but the French customers like to explore new tasting experiences and regularly buy rare micro-lots and 90-plus Arabica coffee.”

The French coffee palate is continuing to expand mirroring that of the United States and other nations where coffee has become an integral part of the hot beverage landscape. However, McCauley cautions that for coffee shops and roasters to remain part of this success they will need to continually evolve and expand with the demands of the industry. “It’s an ongoing process; the evolution of coffee in France is right now. We have to be even more on top of it, to be sure that we in the end are still responding to what we were trying to promote in the beginning,” said McCauley. ☕

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