

# THE ESPRESSO QUEST

THE ESPRESSO LOVER'S BOOK BY INSTAURATOR

# **THE ESPRESSO QUEST**

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## **FOREWORD**

This book is not just another textbook. Rather, it is a record and an explanation of my quest to discover the pure joy found in a cup of espresso coffee. For more than two-and-a-half decades, I have been involved in the selecting, roasting, packing, brewing, tasting and marketing of specialty coffee. Over this time, there have been enormous changes within the coffee industry; not just in my own country of Australia, but all around the world.

Why is it, that of all people, an Australian is writing a book about espresso coffee? As it happens, Australia enjoyed a large influx of Italian immigrants after the Second World War. In turn, they established a vibrant espresso culture that eventually took over the landscape. As a matter of fact, Australia now has the highest market penetration of home electric espresso machines in the world. Yes, more than Italy. Although we can't claim to be the sole arbiters of espresso taste, our national verve for innovation, an inclination to challenge authority, and a solid espresso heritage, provided a very fertile field for espresso to spring up in this most unlikely place. Perhaps this humble field down under may provide a small glimpse into the future, with the rest of the world

following suit and migrating toward espresso-based coffees.

For someone who has made his livelihood from coffee, true joy boils down to one thing. A few sips of thick, syrupy, bittersweet nectar that resembles a rich, dark mocha chocolate liquid mixed with smooth complex spices. This is espresso coffee. The heart of coffee.

It is this humble espresso shot, a thimbleful of black coffee poured in front of our eyes, which has become the foundation of vast coffee empires and complete café menus. It sustains untold households, from the low-paid, humble plantation worker who picks the coffee, to the hi-tech, chic café society set who consumes it.

Of the thousands of coffees tested by professional cuppers each year, only occasionally will someone come across an espresso coffee that has all the elements of perfection. This sublime taste experience is what some professionals describe as “seeing God in the cup”.

It is this experience that excites enormous passion. It drives coffee professionals, as well as many people from all walks of life, to almost fanatically pursue the experience again and again. It requires an investment in learning, because the perfect espresso coffee is so confounding and elusive. Just as a beautiful mirage shimmers in the distance, or the proverbial

end of the rainbow beckons, so too often the wonderful taste of espresso coffee seems just beyond our grasp.

Enormous amounts of time, energy and money have been invested in capturing this elusive taste, not only for personal joy, but for business reasons as well. For if the espresso coffee shot is not taken to its fullest potential, the rest of the coffee menu, and the empire, will falter.

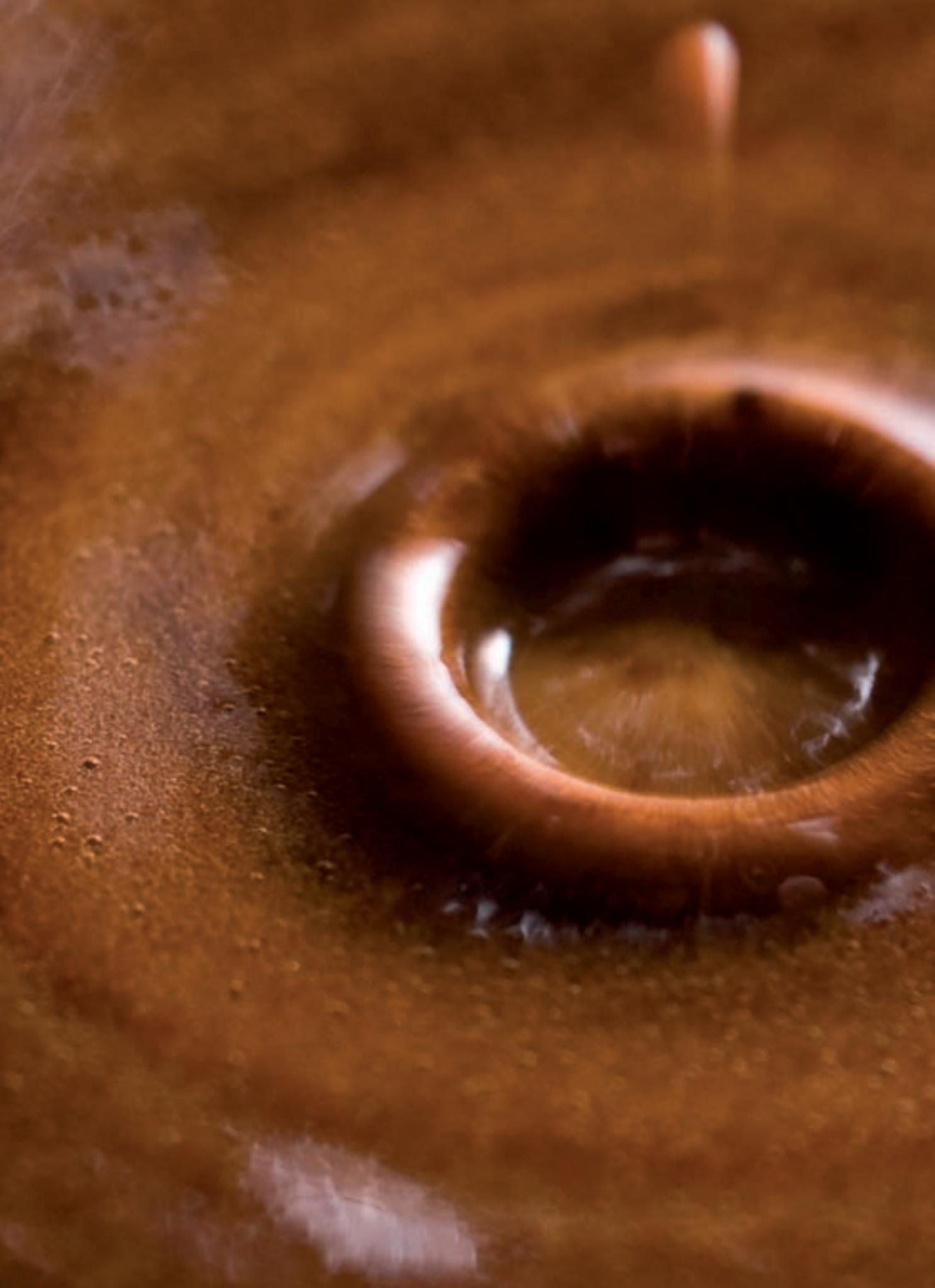
This book is a description of a coffee philosophy, a muse with a few practical hints and a few personal stories that could act as a guide to some. This approach differs from that of numerous textbooks on espresso in that it gets to the heart and soul of espresso. I could say it is a bit like a surgeon though, who sets out to use his scalpel to try and locate a person's spirit. This was always going to be mission impossible.

Coffee's rich history has been told countless times in books that highlight the romance and reach of coffee's past and present. This book is not so much about the exotic countries that coffee is grown in. Instead, it is about what makes the difference between two cafes located side by side. For instance, one may be packed with people, buzzing with vibrant conversation and electrifying ambience, while the other lies empty and lifeless.

A certain alluring mystique periodically attaches itself to coffee. In our current times, that mystique is based around the relatively new form of coffee called espresso. This book is about embracing the invigorating mystique that is espresso coffee, while it also sets out to burst the myths that shroud and hinder the wonderful experience of seeing God in an espresso cup.

My hope is that this book will inspire you in your quest for a great espresso... an experience that can seem so simple, yet is so gloriously complex.





PART I

# The Taste





## **PART I**

When I entered the coffee industry it was by accident. I was on holiday from the university where I was studying for my Bachelor of Arts degree in Australian history, when my brother asked me to help in his new coffee roasting business. Here I am twenty-six years later, still doing coffee.

Through the years, I've invested more than most do in the pursuit of great espresso coffee. I have worked as a barista in my own specialty espresso bars, set up several wholesale roasting factories, trained coffee staff on a national basis, developed practical standards in a real-time business environment and built several successful businesses along the way including an international wholesale espresso roasting business which boasts over 350 stores. In addition to building businesses, I developed evaluation tests and brewing standards for baristas, much of which has been absorbed into World Barista Championship judging criteria. I have been involved as a judge, or Executive Director,



in nearly every World Barista Championship since the inaugural event in Monte Carlo in 2000. I served as a coffee judge at the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW single-estate espresso competition and as the Chairman of The Australian Coffee & Tea Association. My travels have taken me around the world countless times to learn about espresso coffee and to visit some of the world's best coffee farms in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Bolivia, Brazil, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

During my journey, I experienced my fair share of frustration in the search for a sublime espresso. It is a common frustration for all of us who desire a simple, repeatable, good espresso coffee. However, in my quest, I was very fortunate to meet an intuitive espresso genius who was able to reduce the complex dynamics of making a humble espresso coffee down to a simple process. It was this chance meeting that acted as a catalyst for me to continue my quest for my ultimate espresso.



I first met George Sabados at an Australian Coffee and Tea Association meeting where national standards for espresso were being hammered out. After a year and a half of passionate debates, and many cups of espresso later, we finally compromised on a set of guidelines, which have since been adopted nationally by government barista training centers.

Coffee has always enjoyed local variations, and there is no doubt that these guidelines will incite further vigorous debate. There are few hard and fast rules as to what is considered a standard espresso, and this is evident in different parts of the world. Fast-maturing espresso markets such as Sydney or Melbourne, and Seattle or Vancouver in North America, each define the perfect espresso differently. This is true within a single city as well, much like it has been in Sydney for some time (although it may be changing). In my hometown the harbor where the world-famous opera house sits, divides the city in two. On the north side of the harbor, espresso tends to be a bit milder than the full-bodied and powerful Robusta-blend espressos found closer to downtown on the southern side of the harbor. Regardless of where espresso is enjoyed, the indispensable rule is: Always let your taste be your guide.

For centuries, coffee has incited numerous controversies and passionate discussions around the world. I believe that this is healthy as long as it leads to the gathering of wisdom. Unfortunately, wisdom is so elusive because it is one step beyond knowledge. Knowledge comes from learning the information, facts, ideas or principles. Wisdom comes from actively applying knowledge to a practical test. Someone once said that wisdom is 90 percent hindsight. There is a lot of truth to this. Through experience, a person learns the tricks of the trade to avoid common pitfalls, and in the process gains wisdom.

George came from the sensory-inspired European school of espresso, whereas I came from the scientific-based analytical school. This so-called European (or Italian) approach involves more of the senses, whereas the scientific school is more about measuring grams and liquid volumes in

an attempt to try to record the myriad variables involved in creating an espresso. Both of us, however, were united in testing our ideas through practical experiments.

George and I instantly joined forces. I paid for him to fly to Monte Carlo and compete in the inaugural World Barista Championship in 2000. We jumped on the plane together and proceeded to have a lot of fun as we passionately discussed our differing views about espresso. The one thing that united us, in spite of our different approaches, was that we both always let our taste guide us.

Being near the Italian border in Monte Carlo, we came upon many seasoned Italian espresso drinkers. Upon trying my coffee blend at our practice sessions they would refuse to believe that it had been roasted and blended in Australia. They told me it tasted too good, therefore it must be Italian. It was a wonderful compliment. I felt assured they were letting taste be their guide!

The European school of espresso is evident in the old school Italian baristas, who can still be found in large cities around the world, although you may have to go a long way to find one.

Sadly, I have heard reports that the professional barista is in decline in Italy. These good baristas know what an appropriate grind feels like. They know what a good pour looks like. They know how used coffee grinds should

smell. They can tell if the water is too hot, the coffee too stale or too fresh, just by the way the crema looks. Armed with a basic sensory appreciation, they can produce a sublime espresso that beats one prepared by a so-called scientific barista time and again. Unfortunately, these baristas seem to be a dying breed, as they are increasingly replaced by fully automatic machines. Why won't a fully automatic machine produce a more consistent espresso than an imperfect human? We'll touch on that later.

Regardless of which school the barista comes from, in the end, good baristas must be good tasters of coffee. The barista must be able to recognize how variables in brewing affect the flavor in the one place it counts – in the cup. There is no getting away from it. The barista must be able to taste. Otherwise they are merely dressing a window. And the customer will never find what they are looking for in their cup.

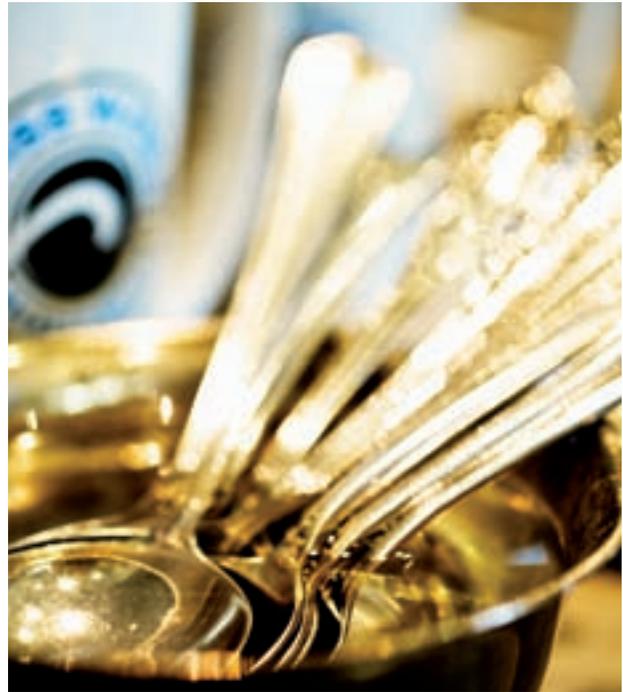
The best baristas combine a few common characteristics. They are curious about what they don't understand. They take care to present their coffees with a unique signature style. They understand they are performers and their customers are the audience to whom they project their personality and passion. Always strict and severe with their coffee standards, they communicate this dedication and passion to their audience through their character, as well as through their beverage. They can be



Traditional cupping requires the removal of 'crema' after stirring and prior to tasting as it tends to taste a little harsh and distorts the flavor profile of the coffee being tasted. Unlike espresso where the presence of crema is seen as vital to the integrity of the flavor.







- (Left to right, top to bottom)*
- Roasted beans
  - Coarse ground coffee for a traditional tasting.
  - Traditional cupping (water poured straight onto the coffee grounds)
  - Tasting spoons await their coffee tasters

flirtatious, merely hospitable or a downright Coffee Nazi. But most importantly, they always love tasting their espresso coffees.

Taste is as important for the barista as it is for the customer. When interviewing potential staff for a position in one of my espresso bars, I quickly learned to ask the hopeful employees if they liked coffee. Without liking the material you are working with, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to have a sympathetic understanding of the product and the customer who purchases it. This is one of the unspoken things customers pick up on. And often without even realizing it, customers will gravitate towards the café that is staffed by baristas who are passionate about their product.

On the other hand, there are also those baristas who can create fancy patterns with milk or chocolate mixed with crema, but sadly they don't have a fundamental understanding of, and sympathy for, the brewing of coffee. Their passion for excellence is lacking, which is an essential piece in a larger puzzle. Without passion, the so-called "Espresso-X Factor," is missing. This passion combined with hard-headed, good organizational skills, is the key to many outstanding and successful businesses and is the true Espresso-X Factor.

My scientific approach to espresso came from my training. I learned to carefully and laboriously weigh and set a commercial grinder to dispense a precise weight of coffee grinds, accurate down to a tenth of a gram. What I have since come to realize is that the trouble with this method is that different roast colors and blends will have different densities. So, once the grinder is set for a particular roast, it will need to be reset for one that varies even by a couple of points on an Agtron spectrophotometer scale. (A spectrophotometer, which measures roast color, is as essential to good coffee roasting as a thermometer.)

What I have found during my extensive experimentation, is that beans that look exactly the same to the naked eye, can taste extremely different depending on how those beans have been roasted. The spread of difference between the color reading of the outside of the bean and the coffee inside, is also critical to good flavor development and can only be measured accurately with a spectrophotometer.

I also learned during my scientific training that the speed at which the lever on the side of the grinder is pulled will vary the amount of coffee that drops into the porta-filter. This too will vary according to the coarseness or fineness of the coffee grinds. Dosing by weight rather than volume reveals a lack of understanding of the 'coffee press,' which is absolutely necessary in order to make a succulent espresso. This small, but important element, can make the brewing of espresso coffee a very inexact, frustrating, and elusive science.