

# Coffee

The Beverage of Commerce

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**M**y first real encounter with the mysterious, murky brew that so awakens the senses, giving me the necessary focus to make it through my days productively surprisingly didn't occur in the States. Once, a cup of coffee was just that to me, "a cup of joe", an appellation that was given to the drink, according to coffee lovers, because of one Josephus Daniels. When he was appointed Secretary of the U.S. Navy by President Wilson in 1913, Daniels promptly abolished the officer's wine mess and decreed that the strongest drink allowed aboard naval vessels, hence forth, would be coffee.

The switch for me from just a cup of commodity coffee to a high culinary artform occurred almost two decades ago when coffee became transformed, at least in my impressionable mind, to a beverage ritual that often includes the accompaniment of a smooth, creamy cheese brioche, a delicate, flakey croissant or an Italian biscotti, its end dipped in chocolate. And, oh, how chocolate does compliment almost any form of coffee drink.

There is, in fact, a strong chocolate connection between coffee and the confection that has been around since 1100 BC and was known by the Aztecs. Today, in both Europe and the US in better coffeehouses, the barista often assures that chocolate is made an integral part of the coffee experience by placing a

**Right:** In addition to the pleasures of aroma and taste, latte art provides a treat for the visual senses as well. Baristas around the world often participate in latte art contests for cash prizes.





square of the delicacy next to the steaming cup when it's served. And in American coffeehouses, the chocolate connection is often further enhanced by actually incorporating chocolate into the hot or cold beverage with the creation of additional specialty drinks that include mocha or hot cocoa. To further entice the customer, chocolate truffles and fudge brownies are often displayed in cases along side giant chocolate chip cookies and muffins that have been shot through with chocolate drops.

Given the long history of both coffee and chocolate consumption, it should not come as too much of a shock that researchers are learning that these satisfying substances may actually convey health benefits. That's right – health benefits!

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The seeds of the cacao tree from which chocolate is made after the beans have been dried and roasted to reveal the cacao nibs, which are then ground into their pure chocolate form, contain

**Left:** Great European coffeehouses often serve a small square of chocolate for which there is no additional charge. Many proprietors consider chocolate to be part of the coffee experience.



Speciality coffee lovers often run across a highly ornate antique espresso machine that has been fully restored to its original elegance.

alkaloids that include theobromine and phenethylamine which clearly produce physiological effects on the human body. Happily, chocolate can actually lower blood pressure and is linked to serotonin levels in the brain.

Once considered to be detrimental to our health, coffee is also enjoying its own health renaissance. A recent issue of the *Harvard Health Letter* reported that like chocolate and alcohol, both of which have been given bad raps in the medical journals of yore, a coffee beverage is now being viewed as a healthful – perhaps, even beneficial drink. Once thought to increase the risk for high blood pressure, longer-term findings are indicating that coffee may not lead to that disease after all and, in fact, may actually have anti-cancer properties. Here's the good news in a nutshell. Coffee drinkers are reportedly 50% less likely to contract certain cancers. Studies are suggesting that the beverage may also lower the rates of colon, breast, and rectal cancers. Further, heavy consumers of coffee may actually be half as prone to contracting diabetes as light or nondrinkers. And, in males – sorry gals – coffee seems to protect the drinker from developing Parkinson's disease.

I can pinpoint the exact year and month when I first perceived my morning latte or espresso drinks as something quite removed from that simple cup of joe – that commodity beverage

**Right:** "Pulling the perfect shot" of espresso results from just the right grind, pressure and tapping down the ground coffee beans into the portafilter basket.



### Cupping – The Coffee Industry’s Grand Ritual

Cupping, a coffee tasting ritual that has transformed coffee trading around the globe, dates back to a single individual – Clarence E. Bickford the president of one of the largest coffee brokerage houses in the States at the close of the 19th century. Bickford began a ritual that bears a strong resemblance to wine tasting – a practice that is as ancient as the produc-



tion of wine itself. And yet, there are also profound differences between wine and coffee tasting. In both, the tasters seek to tease out the often elusive range of perceived flavors and aromas to describe the characteristics of the two beverages, but when I first photographed a cupping ceremony at Portland’s Stumptown Coffee Roast-

ers, I discovered that cupping has many elements that set it apart from wine tasting. Perhaps its greatest distinction is the speed at which the action moves around circular tables that have been designed to spin from one cupper to the next. I could hardly keep up with the often confusing action that quickly unfolded in stages before my camera’s lens. First there was the sniffing of the roasted beans that were

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that had previously been associated with a pre-ground, vacuum packed supermarketed mass-produced stable. “Mamma Mia! That’s a-one good cup of coffee!”

In my earlier days coffee was used more for chasing down a greasy glazed donut – certainly not one of the countless delicate french pastries from the likes of Le Petite Provence, Pix Pâtisserie, Grand Central or one of many other boutique bakery shops that are now so plentiful at Portland or Seattle’s better coffeehouses. It was November, 1993 and my wife and I were back-packing it through Europe after having spent a year in the Middle East working as a technical writing team. Before returning home we decided to purchase a Eurail pass – the best way, we determined, to explore Europe on the cheap.

When we arrived by train at the Venice Santa Lucia Station, before even checking into the charming pension that we had discovered in *Frommer’s Europe by Rail*, we decided to stop off first at one of that ancient city’s abundant coffeehouses. After all, it did seem to make sense – when one is in Italy, one should partake of perhaps that nation’s most famous non-alcoholic beverage. Capiche?

Within minutes of the Grand Canal where the central station was located, we found our coffeehouse. But this was not your father’s ordinary coffee beanery. Here was a grand Italian institution. We were greeted by a baroque interior that was simply brimming with intricately carved wooden columns, stuccoed walls finished in warm Mediterranean colors, delicate 16th century moldings of carved leaves crawling around the door

and window casings, a sea of marble-topped wrought iron tables and chairs arranged attractively on the black and white checked floor tiles – and all capped by a detailed frescoed ceiling that, judging from the extent of the craquelure, might have been painted by a contemporary of Michelangelo, or the master himself.

The crowning architectural feature running across the entire length of the back wall that was covered with a huge beveled mirror was one of the longest marble bars that I had ever sidled up to. Behind the bar stood baristas at the ready, pressed

*Behind the bar stood baristas at the ready, pressed white napkins draped over their forearms and white waiter's jackets that had been starched beyond belief.*

white napkins draped over their forearms and white waiter's jackets that had been starched beyond belief. Finally, there was the espresso machine that was the focus of it all looking like the shiny brass boiler in the bowels of a luxury cruise liner. That coffeehouse's hardware was stunningly beautiful, gleaming like it had just been polished by a proud boiler tender. And to our surprise, standing smack dab in the center of the neatly arranged tables was a distinguished moustachioed security guard – erect and at attention as though he might have been protecting the crown jewels in the Tower of London.

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arranged in cups. After the aromas had been identified, the beans were finely ground and placed in cups once again to be inhaled a second time while the cuppers made notations concerning the unique aromas that emerged. Then boiling water was added to the beans and the smelling and spinning resumed anew. Special cupping spoons were employed to crack through the "crust" that had formed on the liquid's surface. Finally, the spoon transported the hot liquid to the cuppers' lips and the real tasting had formally begun. Noses almost dove into the cups and sounds of sniffing, slurping and spitting enveloped the room. Often a cupper would close his or her eyes and I could imagine that they were being figuratively transported to the fields where the beans had been grown, as a myriad of coffee flavors danced across their palates and words like "vanilla", "fruity", "chocolate" and "earthy" filled the air.





The elegant simplicity and portability of the French press has made this device popular with hikers and hunters who brew their coffee in travel mug versions.



A security guard in a coffeehouse! This was a serious commercial undertaking. For these Italians, dispensing coffee seemed to land somewhere between haute cuisine and a journey in Jules Verne's gleaming submarine on its Voyage au centre de la Terre. What technology, what precision in glistening metals, valves, knobs, pressure gauges, gadgets and accompanying accessories that included tampers for tapping down the perfect coffee shot. Wow! Were we impressed.

So just exactly what is an espresso machine anyway? Why has that gleaming, hissing mechanical behemoth become the crowning achievement of the speciality coffee industry?

Throughout the twentieth-century the percolator coffee maker was synonymous with a morning's fresh cup of coffee and getting the day on its way. I remember as a kid in the forties and fifties that that was the way my mornings always started – first the aroma of fresh brewing coffee came gently wafting into my bedroom and then, if I really focused hard as I lay there between the sheets, I could hear the comforting blub-blub, blub-blub coming from the kitchen and imagine the coffee dancing within the percolator's glass top bubble. Since no electricity was required to brew coffee in a stove-top percolator, the appliance always enjoyed great popularity with campers and sportsmen. There was only one problem with the device when it came to

**Left:** These cooling coffee beans have just been dumped from Stumptown's Probat antique coffee roaster that was manufactured by a German firm established in 1868.



Our espressos have become an American obsession. But, for the coffee lover on the move, there's no need to forgo that daily ritual. They will, however, have to sacrifice the Barista's latte art if they request a beverage "to go" in a paper cup.

making a great cup of joe – percolators broke two cardinal rules of coffee brewing: (1) Never boil coffee, and (2) Don't allow water to pass over the coffee grounds more than once.

An interesting aside of the percolator is that it was invented by an American scientist and soldier, one Count Rumford, who conceived of the appliance during his pioneering work with the Bavarian Army where he is renowned for not only improving the diet of the Bavarian soldier but their clothing as well. His moti-

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vation for the invention of the percolator was due to his distaste for alcohol and his dislike for tea which led him to the use of coffee and its stimulating benefits for the soldiers in the field.

By the early 1970s automatic drip coffee makers, French presses and then the espresso machines were supplanting the earlier percolators that had become so ubiquitous in America's kitchens and restaurants. The espresso machine became the personification of the 20th-century and was invented in 1901. Walking into a coffeehouse, the first thing you notice is the noise, the grinding of fresh coffee beans, the tapping and knocking and, of course, the steam, and more steam. It's all about being pure 20th-century, and coming into its own during the golden age of





**Left:** A master roaster evaluates a pull of roasting coffee beans taken from the center of Stumptown's Probat roaster.

**Center Above:** Steam rises from freshly roasted beans in Stumptown roaster's spinning cooling bin.

**Right Above:** Eyes closed in concentration, a cupper brings the hot brew to his lips.

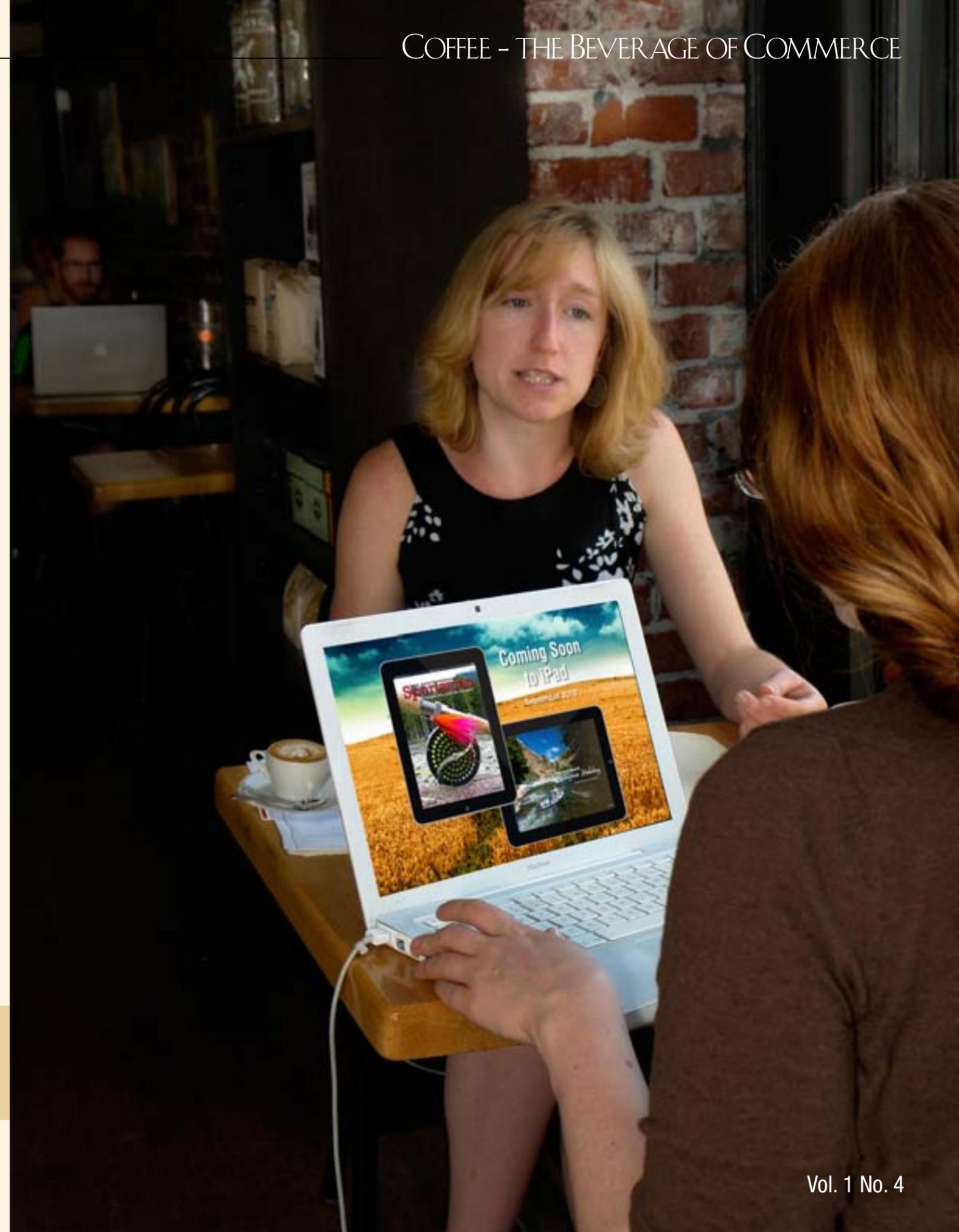
the Italian Vespa – that fast moving, brightly colored personal people mover. Thus, we have espresso – rapida, on the spot for people caught up in the rush of the industrial age. Espresso and people on the run became the hallmark of the emerging coffeehouses that were now popping up across the globe – from Paris, Texas to Beijing, China.

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The principle of brewing with an espresso machine is fairly straightforward and uses pressure to force water through a tightly compacted cake of coffee that has been finely ground. The taste of the espresso depends greatly on the fineness of the grind and the amount of pressure used to tamp the grind into the portafilter prior to locking that “basket” into the espresso machine where the steam is then forced through the cake.

But equally important to the taste of a great speciality cup

**Right:** The cybercafe has become the meeting place of choice for busy workers who seek a blend of both work and relaxation.



of coffee is the care that goes into growing the bean to begin with and then the expertise that also must come into play during its harvesting and when roasting it to perfection. That's where the sciences of botany, chemistry and physics all converge to make speciality coffee a uniquely 20th and 21st-century beverage.

After our adventures in Italy had come to an end, we returned to the States with a new awareness of speciality coffee and a new addiction that I now needed to support. We landed on the east coast and first decided to stop off in New Mexico for a

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year. There, we wrangled a job with the Museum of New Mexico Foundation creating a beautiful direct mail catalog that featured the original art of native American Indians and New Mexico's indigenous hispanics, before finally meandering our way back across the States to the Pacific Northwest – the hotbed of speciality coffees and the home of Starbucks where the world-wide coffee craze all began. Thanks to that company's unparalleled success, coffee continues to comfortably hold its own as the most heavily traded commodity after oil.

Since then I've spent so many pleasant and productive hours in coffeehouses throughout the Pacific Northwest. After all, spending time in one of these warm and inviting estab-

lishments, with the sound of their hissing espresso machines drowning out nearly any other audible noise, coupled with the delicious aroma of a freshly roasted batch of coffee beans can be nothing less than totally intoxicating.

I must confess that these days I am happily hooked on my morning brew and, in fact, few afternoons arrive that do not also include return visits to my favorite coffee haunts – and I do most certainly have my favorites – both coffeehouses and specific roasters. Oh yes, there are definitely significant taste differences between one roaster and the next that further heighten the gastronomical experience.

The success of coffee as a world-traded commodity can be traced back long before Starbucks became a major purveyor of the arabica coffees found today around the globe. In David Liss' engaging book, *The Coffee Trader: A Novel* that was based on the factual and revealing memoirs of Alonzo Alferonda and a must-read for any coffee devotee, Liss takes the reader back to the days of the world's first commodities exchange in the Amsterdam of 1659 – a time when world trade was populated by schemers, rogues and when deception ruled the day – perhaps not that unlike our own economic times.

In his novel, Liss describes the book's main character, Miguel Lienzo, a member of Amsterdam's close-knit community of Portuguese "Converso Jews" who made his living working in the world's first commodities exchange where fortunes could be won or lost in a single transaction. Miguel was seeking a way to regain his financial footing, after having lost nearly everything



when there was a sudden reversal in the sugar market. Liss' description of Miguel's first sips of a totally new commodity – coffee was classic.

“Two earthen bowls sat steaming with a liquid blacker than the wines of Cahors. In the dim light, Miguel gripped the lightly chipped vessel with both hands and took his first taste.

*Unlike beer and wine which make a man or woman, amorous, merry and can lead to foolishness and eventually will render the imbiber into a state of somnolence – coffee is brewed to make a man clear headed and wakeful.*

It had a rich, almost enchanting, bitterness – something Miguel had never before experienced. It bore a resemblance to chocolate, which once he had tasted years ago.” Miguel learned that day that coffee was to be taken, not to titillate the senses, but to awaken the intellect. “Its advocates drink it at breakfast to regain their senses, and they drink it at night to help them remain awake longer.” Unlike beer and wine which make a man or woman, amorous, merry and can lead to foolishness and eventually will render the imbiber into a state of somnolence

**Left:** From green coffee beans to a dark roast, coffee roasters must be part scientist, part technician, to tease out the beans' natural oils, aroma and flavor.

– coffee is brewed to make a man clear headed and wakeful. Coffee, Miguel learned is “the drink of commerce.”

As I sit adding the finishing touches to this article, I am happily working at an outside table at Pete’s Coffee & Tea, known for its rich frothy brews and that company’s commitment to agricultural sustainability – from source to cup. Right next to Pete’s is a Starbucks – their close proximity serving as a testament to the vitality of the Pacific Northwest’s coffee trade. And stretching across the full length of the front of the uptown market where the two establishments are located is a long line of large outdoor umbrellas, sharing the sidewalk together, with Pete’s and Starbucks’ names prominently emblazoned around their circumferences.

If I close my eyes, I have no difficulty imagining that I’m seated in one of Paris’ abundant cafes that serve as the hub of that city’s vibrant neighborhoods. Around the globe, coffeehouses have become the rendez-vous spots of preference, the ideal places to network, relax and refuel and are often where the political pulse of a city is best experienced. Today’s coffeehouses have become true cybercafes that are serving their patrons as Wi-Fi hot spots, allowing them to not only connect with the people they’ve come to know who also frequent these meeting and working places, but to also reach out and make contact with the world outside their immediate grasp and experience. 

**Right:** Fresh cut flowers and espresso share the sidewalk next to Trader Joe’s grocery store in an upscale Portland neighborhood.

