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FOOD

Coffee, anyone?

The joy of java

By Jennifer Tramm

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 10.10.2007

Coffee has become a passion to many people around the world. Its flavor and aroma can invoke memories of long talks, morning rituals and lazy afternoons with friends.

While some people enjoy an average cup of joe found in their supermarket aisles already ground and ready to be brewed, others have discovered the joy of fresh coffee.

Scott Gilliland and his family run Adventure Coffee Roasting in Tucson out of the back of a pickup truck in a farmers market. Most of Gilliland's day consists of roasting green coffee beans to the point of perfection. The rest of the day revolves around talking to people about coffee.

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He and his partner and wife, Denise, are often asked about the best way to store coffee. For years, their answer was to store it in an airtight container on the countertop or in the cupboard. Then they realized that the information they were giving to their customers was just something they had read on the Internet. They decided to find out for themselves.

Over four weeks, the pair, along with Jennifer English, owner of Flavorbank, a local spice shop,

tested three variations on the coffee theory: freezer, refrigerator or room temperature. Two sets of beans — one in an airtight package and another in the package they come in — were placed in a freezer, another two on the counter, and the final two in the refrigerator.

They stored the coffee only in bean form, as ground coffee deteriorates very rapidly, Scott said.

The beans were taken out of storage every day and exposed to air and kneaded or stirred around a bit, to simulate daily usage, Denise said.

At the end of each week, Denise randomly numbered each quantity, labeled similar cups and brought the coffee to Flavorbank for "cupping," as tasting is called in the coffee-aficionado world. The coffee tested was Adventure's house blend for Flavorbank.

After the cups were set up on a tray, water was heated to boiling, the beans were ground and measured equally, and the coffee was brewed through a one-cup pour-over filter made with fine gold-plated mesh. Paper filters, Scott said, soak up the flavorful oils.

At first, Scott "bloomed" the coffee, meaning he poured just a little water into each pour-over to allow the grounds to expand so they could release more flavor. Then he poured the rest of the water.

Over the four weeks, Scott and English judged each sample by using spoons to dip out a bit of coffee and then sip it into their mouths with a rapid intake of air at the same time. According to Denise, this allowed the coffee to hit every part of their mouths at the same time, allowing the full flavor to emerge. The only sounds during the tasting were slurps and the occasional comment.

They then rated them according to cup number. Cup numbers, along with their corresponding coffee quantities, changed each week to keep the test blind.

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What other coffee aficionados do:

- Kay Quinn, one of the managers at Raging Sage coffee shop, 2458 N. Campbell Ave., said the shop keeps its beans in the freezer. They grind them just prior to brewing. Recommendations to customers: If buying retail coffee in a bag, place it in a zip-top bag and store it in the freezer, even if it is already ground.

- Margaret Hadley, one of the owners at Le Buzz, 9121 E. Tanque Verde Road, recommended that customers buy whole beans, store them in an airtight room-temperature container and grind them when needed. Hadley did not recommend storage in the freezer or in a refrigerator, nor near a heat source. Hadley had no recommendation for long-term storage, as the shop roasts its beans weekly. "Fresh is better," she said. "Having good-quality water also helps." Hadley recommended using filtered water for best brewing results.

- Denney Willis, owner of Arbuckle Coffee Roaster, said he roasts as often as possible and keeps his beans in the freezer when he needs to. He sees no need to keep the beans in an airtight container. He does tell customers to avoid refrigerator storage, as smells from food inside can affect the coffee's flavor. He recommended that customers store their beans in the freezer and, when time to grind, not to bother defrosting them. The need for an airtight container will depend on the household, Willis said. If the freezer is opened often, then placing the beans in a sealed container may help. He did his own taste test on the issue of coffee storage after a friend told

Experts share taste tests

Week One

Seven days after roasting

At the start of tasting, Scott Gilliland and Jennifer English, who are both accustomed to drinking freshly roasted coffee daily, noticed a difference. All six cups tasted a bit different from what they were used to.

Scott said that, as he was going to the first tasting, he thought the coffee tastes would remain consistent.

"We were shocked to see such a different taste," he said.

Despite that, both decided they were still tasty and full flavored. In their determination of taste, the judges rated how well the flavor started off at first taste, how long the flavor lasted, the "brightness" of acidity, the fruity "notes" in the middle and the finish, which is the flavor left after the coffee has been consumed.

Scott went so far as to say the samples were "vibrant and flavorful."

English agreed. "They were all yummy," she said.

After tasting the six samples of coffee, Scott and English acknowledged a clear winner and a clear loser. The winner: Coffee stored in an airtight container at room temperature. The loser: Coffee stored in the freezer in the bag it came in. English absolutely did not like either of the varieties stored in the freezer.

Week Two

14 days after roasting

The first thing the judges noticed in the second week was the color of the coffee. English said she saw how "profoundly lighter" the colors were, compared with the week before.

Scott said that the difference was probably that the oils and aromatics were less prominent.

Just before testing, English lamented having to test the "bad freezer coffee."

After tasting a few samples, English said, "I don't like what I'm experiencing, and this is my (houseblend)."

She said the coffee she tasted was impersonating her blend. "Like Rich Little, it's talented, but the taste is not the same," she said.

Scott agreed. "I'm not crazy about them today," he said. "Wait 'til next week. Good Lord!"

"We may not be able to drink it by the fourth week," he added.

Scott described what turned out to be the refrigerator sample in the airtight container as having a tinny taste to it.

English said all of the coffees were bitter and thin.

Denise said that the differences were probably so dramatic to the judges because their last memories of the coffee were of good taste and color. Had they tasted the coffee samples every day, she added, the difference would have been gradual and hardly noticed.

English's least favorite was the coffee stored in the refrigerator in the airtight container. Her favorite, to everyone's surprise, was stored in the bag it came in, in the freezer.

Scott's favorite was room temperature, in an airtight container. His least favorites were, like English's, the samples from the refrigerator.

Week Three

21 days after roasting

The first thing Scott noticed this week was how quickly the water went through the grounds. He thought that it might have been that the beans had been drying out.

English immediately saw that the colors were darker.

After tasting and busily scribbling for a few moments, English said, "This is the damndest thing."

She tasted a bit more, and then said, "All righty, this is weird."

She looked up at Scott and said, "I mean, how can this be?"

Scott nodded and said, "They taste better than last week."

Despite the surprise, neither judge felt that the coffee tasted good.

English described one that turned out to be from the freezer in the bag it came in as tasting like "wet, steamed cornhusk." She also noted a distinct aluminumlike taint to the flavor.

Scott actually liked that one. He said it had more of a "punch."

English said, "A cornhusk punch."

Scott maintained that the "corn husk"-flavored coffee was his favorite.

English's favorite turned out to be one stored in the refrigerator, in its original bag.

issue of coffee storage after a friend told him he was wasting electricity with the freezer. His test results matched those of Adventure Coffee Roasting.

- For coffee service companies, the storage methods are somewhat different from local coffee shops. Both Farmer Brothers Coffee Co. and Ace Vending Inc. have their coffee prepackaged and ready to brew, shipped in from outside Tucson. They advise storing it at room temperature in the airtight bags the grounds come in.

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"They didn't degrade as much as I thought," Scott said, though all of the cups were bitter.

Week Four

28 days since roasting

For this last taste test, Denise set out a special, extra cup. It was a cup of the Flavorbank blend, freshly roasted. It was to be saved for last.

English smelled it and said, "That's the reward for going through the rest of them!"

After all of the coffee cups were finished brewing, English held one up and said, "That's Mississippi mud right there. Two weeks ago, you could read a newspaper through them."

Scott said the coffee had remained "kind of yucky overall after the first week."

Scott described one of the samples as "groundy" and "woody," but not bad.

For Scott, choosing a worst proved impossible this week. "They're all harsh for me."

Best: Stored in the bag in the freezer. The sample stored airtight in the refrigerator was close but had a taint.

English echoed detection of the taint. She also felt it was bitter.

English's choice for worst that week was the room temperature coffee stored in an airtight container, though the coffee stored in the freezer in an airtight container was "bitter from start to finish."

English ended up with the same favorite as Scott, though she said, "There were some really bad, blah, yucky coffees on our tray."

Denise thought the results came out the way they did because, after the first week, the freezer-stored beans showed the initial change, like the others. Later on, however, they ended up holding the flavor, while the others deteriorated.

Results

Over the long term, the sample stored in the freezer in its own bag was the victor in this four-week taste test, though both Scott and English said it was tough picking the winner.

English viewed the results of the test pragmatically. She said they should not dismiss them out of hand as bad. "Who's to say that a chef won't love an astringent flavor (to add flavor to a dish)?" she said.

Scott said the taste of the coffee really hinges on how freshly roasted the beans are. By the time coffee hits the grocery shelves, he said, it could be weeks or months old. Packages often have expiration dates of up to nine months, he said. If purchasing coffee at the grocery store, Scott recommended that customers look at the date and buy the one with the longest time until expiration.

His final recommendations, however, were to buy the beans fresh, buy only what is needed for a week or two and grind them right before brewing. If longer storage is needed, then storing the beans in the freezer, container notwithstanding, appeared to be the best method.

• *Jennifer Tramm is a Tucson-based freelance writer.*



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