

Coffee-house Capers

Coffee-house Capers - Kaldi, Boughton, Roark, Malone



Stories of the
coffee-house
trade, and the
people in it,
from the
cafe trade's top
news magazine

By Kaldi the Goatherd

with a little help from Ian Boughton, Trudi Roark, Scoop Malone and Max the Bean
in aid of Shelter from the Storm and Health Help International

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Another example is La Spaziale's admiration of the work done by Shelter from the Storm and HHI - great work by people from this trade.

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Foreword...

The coffee trade is one which has been made up of many characters over the years. As a result, those who have learned that this book was to be published have asked – have you written about all the great characters in the history of the trade?

No - because there are so many that to namecheck them all would result in a book like a phone directory. Any memoir has to be slightly selective, and after ten years of running the trade's main news magazine, we have simply encountered too many to include them all.

Nor is this a definitive history of the coffee-house trade. We are not as obsessed as some people about whether we're currently in the third wave of modern coffee-houses, or the fourth, or the fifteenth. We are not obsessed about such current fads as not allowing sugar and milk to be seen in certain brew-bar coffee houses. (It is true that the editor is fascinated by the history of the Soho coffee-bars of the 1950s, where rock'n'roll was effectively invented, but we haven't dwelt on that era either.)

No, this is a more of a personal memoir of hundreds of favourite stories from the first nine years of our Coffee House magazine. Many of those stories didn't even make it into print - some of them because they were just too dangerous!

So this is certainly not a history of the coffee-bar trade. But, just as we can all learn from the conventional kind of history, we do hope this book shows that you can pick up a remarkable amount from the off-the-wall kind of history as well.



-Kaldi

This book is dedicated to Trudi, without whom the adventure of running our own magazine would simply not have happened.

Grateful thanks and acknowledgement are also due to Louie Salvoni, Barry Kither, McKenzie, Elliot Gard, and Helen Marriott

Angus

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Disclaimer – It has been said of the author of this book that he has a memory like a garbage can - everything goes into it, and you're simply not sure what's going to come out, or when. Anyone claiming to be a character in this book, or questioning anything recalled in this book, faces legal

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Those who were responsible for this book:

Kaldi is, according to legend, the goatherd boy who discovered coffee. In later life he turned to journalism, and his regular column in Boughton's Coffee House magazine can be relied upon to turn up the more bizarre aspects of coffee-trade life... many of which have made their way into this book. Kaldi is illustrated by Derek West of Witney, Oxfordshire.



Scoop Malone is the experienced, seen-it-all, reporter for Coffee House. As is often the sad case these days, Scoop does not know who his illustrator was. However, he really does bear an uncanny resemblance to a reporter Ian worked with on a national daily paper in the 60s!



Trudi is the most systematic one in what might loosely be called the Coffee House 'organisation'. The whole magazine may well have been her idea in the first place... it was certainly her idea to create the first truly news-led monthly publication in the trade. She handles accounts, administration, and with remarkable resilience, puts up with being married to...



Ian has been writing for what might laughingly be called 'a living' since he went into newspapers, in 1964 or thereabouts, making the traditional start as a copy-boy, at the bottom of the pile... and it has been all downhill from there on. He has edited something over a dozen different trade magazines for various industries; he has written four previous books, all for various charitable causes.



The dramatic sunset in the cover picture was taken by Janis Neville of Sydney, Australia, who is our down-under coffee correspondent (and is Trudi's sister).



The causes:

Shelter From The Storm is the refuge for the homeless of London, of which Louie Salvoni of Espresso Service has been a founder and driver, and which is now supported by many people in the coffee trade. Indeed, so many of the trade's top baristas have put in volunteer shifts serving at the shelter, it has been quite reasonably observed that there have been nights when the very best coffee in London has been that served to the homeless of King's Cross and Islington! From a small start as a Christmas refuge in a church, Shelter from the Storm has risen in just a handful of years to become London's only 365-night accommodation for the homeless.



Health Help International is one of the UK's great little charities. From a base in Newport, Gwent, it exists to support healthcare for the destitute sick of south-west India and Zambia, having been inspired by a life-changing experience for the founder, who fell ill on his first trip to India and saw at first hand the suffering of those who could not pay for treatment. In Kerala province there is now an entire network of pastors, inspired by a man who left Australia thirty years ago to visit the work of Mother Teresa - and who never returned, and who leads by example to this day. In Zambia, unbelievable as it sounds to British ears, HHI takes healthcare to communities of up to ten thousand people who may never, ever, have met a doctor. The stories of HHI's work have been documented in books and spoken-word CDs by Ian, the editor of Coffee House.





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Coffee-house Capers

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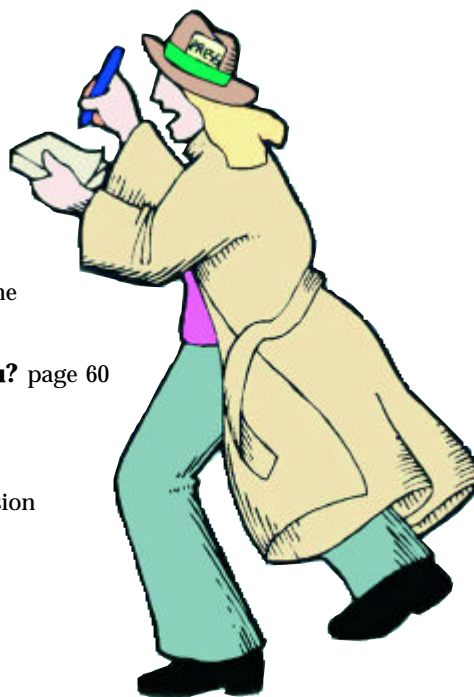
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1. In the beginning...

The bean and the Barbie theory

In the beginning there was the bean. Apparent blasphemy in the first sentence of a book is, we fear, only going to confirm the reputation of Boughton's Coffee House magazine in some eyes, but don't worry. As always, we shall press on regardless.

But we all have to take the coffee bean seriously, because this little thing might be more important than you think – the book of Genesis might have to be re-written, if we go along with the theory of Antony Wild, author of *Coffee - a Dark History*.

He tells us that in Ethiopia, which is generally seen as the birthplace of coffee, palaeontologists dug up the fossilised remains of mankind's oldest ancestor: "One of the mysteries of anthropology is the so-called brain explosion about 500,000 years ago," explained Wild. "Man's brain expanded, allowing him to communicate concepts which had previously been unthinkable.

"It is tempting to wonder whether wild coffee trees in those Ethiopian highland forests had a hand in the process... the sudden dawn of self-awareness in Genesis is something which could well have been prompted by a psychoactive substance, such as caffeine. To place a bright red coffee cherry centre-stage in the story of the Fall is altogether a far more inspired piece of casting than a lowly Golden Delicious!"

Now, for anyone in the catering world with a talent for promotion, you can still get that historic bean. Not just generic Ethiopian coffee as such, whose varieties are justly famous, and which you can get from many fine suppliers (and several lousy ones), but the one which is believed to be the real Garden of Eden bean.

It's the Tana Island bean, which you can get from Sea Island Coffees. It is grown on an island in the middle of a lake in Ethiopia, by resident monks who reckon that this was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept for 800 years. Lake Tana is also the location of a matching legend in which the monk Betremariam received coffee from the archangel Gabriel, with instructions to cultivate it. (Another story says that the Ark was hidden on another Ethiopian island, which also still grows coffee, during the invasion of a fanatic Arab warlord called Achmed the Left-Handed, who always sounds to us like a supporting character from a pantomime).

Now, still trying to stay the right side of heresy, we can show that coffee continues to hold its place in the spiritual world. Quite recently, the Pope beatified 'friar cappuccino', a 17th century cleric called Marco d'Aviano. The blessed Marco was sent in 1683 to expel a visiting Turkish army, and while looting what they left behind, discovered stocks of a strange bitter drink made from beans. He didn't like it much, so he sweetened it with honey and milk... and, as Marco was a Capuchin monk, guess what he got?!

Others do swear that coffee had already reached his country, that a previous pope

had already approved of it, and all Marco did was devise a new recipe. But we were not at all surprised to learn that at the same time as Marco received his official halo, the Vatican opened its own coffee house.

OK, does this coffee subject sound interesting so far? It's true, it is - just don't go over the top about it.

Frankly, we get weary of the most over-done cliché of all, concerning those people who are 'passionate' about coffee. We can think of other things to be passionate about, thanks. But on *Coffee House* magazine we really do have a great and genuine respect for people who are sufficiently enthusiastic about coffee (and indeed, tea) to go out and open their own cafes.

Running a café is not a business decision – it's a dream, and it was described most sadly some years back by American writer Michael Idov.

He said that the dream of running a small cafe has nothing to do with the thrills of entrepreneurship or the freedom of being one's own boss – if that's all there were to it, people would get excited about opening laundrettes.

No, he said, opening a café is a fantasy about a perpetual dinner party which starts with Barbie tea sets and cuts deeper than any other capitalist urge. "To a couple in the throes of the cafe dream," he wrote, "money is almost an afterthought – which is good, because they're going to lose a lot of it."

He reminded us that one of the traditional catering yardsticks of viability is: make your rent and other overheads in four days to be profitable, a week to break even. If you haven't hit the latter mark in a month, close.


"Guess what, dear dreamers?" added Michael Idov. "The psychological gap between working in a cafe because it's fun and romantic, and working there because you have to... is enormous."

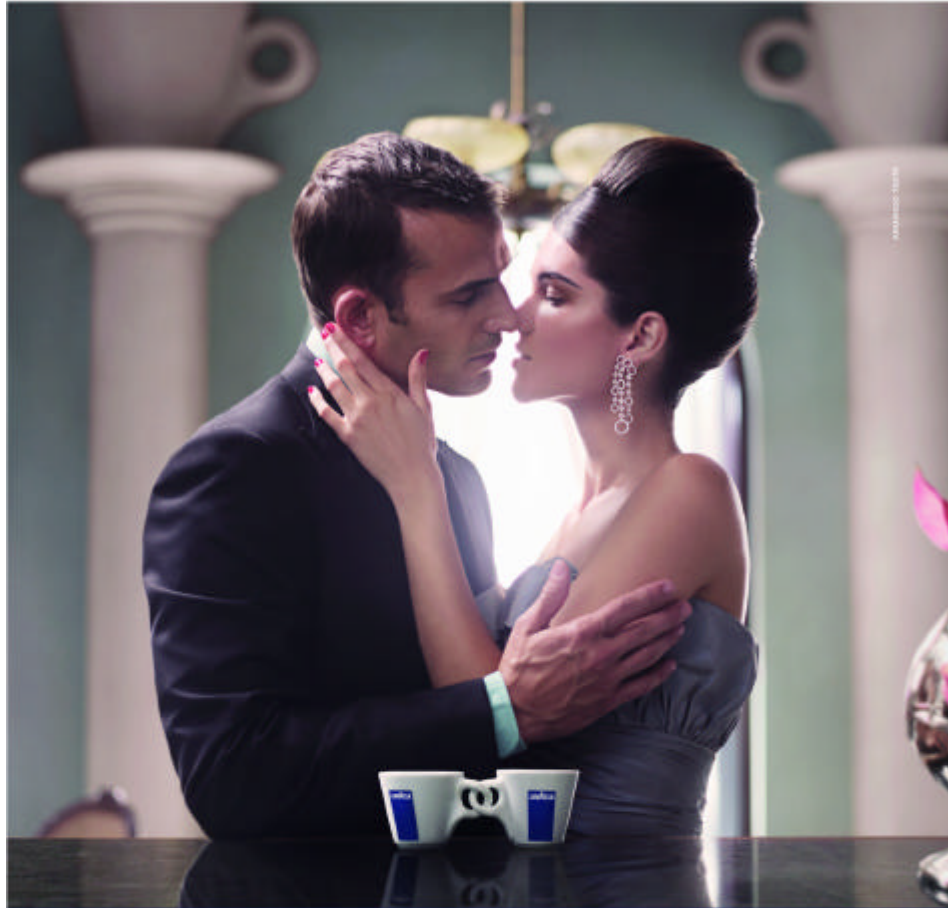
He reminded us of the words of chef Anthony Bourdain, who wrote in his *Kitchen Confidential*: "The most dangerous species of caterer ... is the one who gets into this business for love."

But people still do it. Hundreds every year, bless 'em.

It is to all those who have attempted the coffee-house or tea-room dream that this book is most respectfully offered!



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- no, not from Kaldi, of course, but available to the coffee-house trade through Italy's favourite coffee, which is delighted to support his good causes.

LAVAZZA



2. Here is the news...

The unsanitised version for those who like it real

Let's get this absolutely straight – *Coffee House* is the most active news outfit in the beverage trade, in that we scour international news daily for things which are useful to our readers, and we are also the most active writers promoting the beverage trade, as well. (We may possibly be the only writers promoting the British beverage trade to the outside world, but that's another story).

Why do we keep a watching brief on global news, when so many of our readers are cafe owners and trade suppliers making their living in the UK? Easy – the caterer who knows what's going on is the one who's going to win. And we'll tell you something both helpful, useful, and entertaining, too – when your coffee salesman comes calling, and you can tell him something about his own subject which he doesn't know, and sometimes you can tell him things about his own brand that he doesn't know, he starts treating you with a sight more respect and a lot more attention!

And sometimes the news we find is so darned entertaining, we find it hard to be serious about this coffee trade.

We do love our coffee crime stories. It is always said that the American police seem to spend all their time in coffee shops, and we now understand why - you ought to see how often cafes figure in the American papers' law reports.

But why is it, we often ask, that the cafe trade experiences more lunatic hold-up attempts than any other retail business? And why do coffee-house staff make a habit of unsuccessfully robbing their own trade in America? In the most straightforward recent case, a California man being chased by police after a series of a dozen gunpoint robberies based entirely on coffee shops was finally caught, when he held up a café where he used to work. A co-worker recognised him.

Think that's silly? Try this, one of our very favourites:

Again in America, two robbers held up a Starbucks store. Having tied up the staff, the thieves discovered that there was insufficient cash in the till – so they served customers for an hour until the take was worthwhile. How did police trace them almost immediately? One had made the fatal mistake of picking the store where she trained as a barista, and tying up the very manager who had trained her.

The same happened in south America a few months back. The *Estado de Sao Paolo* newspaper reported how a black-clad gunman attempted to rob the local New Coffee cafe. In spite of the robber's mask, the manager recognised him as one of the cafe's own staff, and later told police that "knowing who he was gave me confidence to fight him, because I know he is a coward."

It gets sillier. Try this...

Police in Oregon had to look for a man who, just after robbing a coffee stand, then ordered a drink and - wait for it - paid for it with some of the money he had just stolen! (There's a slightly similar British story from the Six-Eight cafe in Birmingham, where a guy allegedly came in and said he had no money for a coffee, so could he take some from the staff tip jar?)

Believe it or not, they come even stranger than that. A man in Nevada was jailed for leaving a coffee shop without paying for a takeaway coffee. His big mistake was that as he exited, he dropped the drink... so he went back and asked for a replacement. That's when he got caught.

One robber from North Carolina almost got away for lack of evidence. He entered a coffee-house and demanded money, allegedly with a banana under his t-shirt which he pretended was a gun. The shop owner and customers combined to overcome the thief, but he managed to eat the evidence before police arrived.

Another criminal came to his end at one of the great institutions of America and Canada, the 'drive-thru' coffee bar. The *Ottawa Citizen* reported how a Canadian police officer had driven into a drive-thru for a drink when a call came through describing a stolen motor caravan; the officer happened to glance in his rear-view mirror and realised that there was the stolen vehicle. The staff at the coffee bar said that the resulting arrest was 'the highlight of their day', adding that the caravan driver appeared 'shocked and stunned' to reach for his coffee and find himself handcuffed.

But also in Canada, the same police coffee habit brought one officer down when he stopped in the cold outside a coffee shop. He was so keen to get in for his takeaway that he forgot to lock in his prisoner in the back seat!

We shouldn't really laugh about this next police call-out, but it does have its funny moments. A waitress in a Miami coffee house realised that a departing customer had left something on her counter - a live grenade. The police shut down the shop and the surrounding area while bomb technicians removed it. A police spokesman said, thoughtfully: "the problem with these things is that once you detonate them, there isn't much evidence left to investigate."

The coffee shop owner said she is used to cash tips being left on the counter, but that she didn't realise her service was bad enough to warrant a bomb. She added that while the shop lost a couple of hours' business, the police and bomb squad made up for it by buying vast amounts of coffee and pastries - and tipped her staff very well, too.

In New York, a subway line was closed for hours for a bomb scare. It turned out that a commuter, wanting a coffee, had plugged his single-cup maker into a cleaner's power socket, and when staff saw the suspicious power cord, they called the cops. But why, asked commuters, was the line then shut down for a clear two hours after the police had discovered the coffee machine? The local paper, in true acid New York style, commented that of course, once the police had found a coffee machine, they automatically went searching for donuts to go with it.

To be fair, it is not just the American coffee trade, or indeed the American police, who are responsible for these wonderful stories. The Croatian news agency recently reported that two policemen arrested a man who was wanted for over a hundred offences.

He persuaded them to let him take them to a café for 'one last cup of coffee', and as the police sat at a table, they quite astonishingly let him go up to pay the bill... and he disappeared through the back door into nearby woods.

We were convulsed with giggles at a report in the *Daily News and Analysis* of India, which just shows the dangers of colloquialisms and slang terms. In Mumbai, which I still think of as Bombay, a senior inspector of police was apparently given a carpeting for not cracking down on prostitutes doing business from tables outside cafés, so he went and overturned all the tables. The popular chains of Coffee Day, Barista and Fanoos all made indignant protests to the press, who reported (and say this out loud to get the full impact): "Perhaps the worst-hit café is Fanoos, which is famous for its milk-shakes and Lebanese hookahs..."

Case proved!



The café trade itself ends up in court on dozens of occasions. We try to report these cases, mainly so that other coffee-house owners are aware of problems, but sometimes it gets tricky.

We always have to be very careful with stories about Starbucks. On the one hand, the chain is rightly admired for kick-starting the coffee-bar industry, but on the other, it is derided for some of its actions. On the one hand again, we have had some good friends within Starbucks – on the other, top man Howard Schulz has consistently avoided *Coffee House*, and Starbucks' corporate communications can be the funniest things in the world. American corporates can be extremely pompous in the way they phrase things, and at one point every Starbucks response to any enquiry always contained a phrase something like: 'Starbucks touches the lives of a zillion people every day...'

Even without that particular phrase, Starbucks' corporate communications are always composed in a way that suggests the organisation is a cuddly protective big-brother figure, gently showing the rest of the coffee trade the right way through its own all-encompassing wisdom.

It follows that someone so big is likely to appear in the news a lot, and sometimes I think our entire magazine must look like it is devoted to 'have a go at Starbucks', which really isn't so... it's just that they have so much going on, and appear in the international news so constantly.

One of the most regular continuing stories is of Starbucks' endless series of lawsuits against anyone who creates a name which comes remotely near their trademark. And they are not always successful: we were fascinated to read of the decision by a court in New Hampshire to allow a micro-roastery to continue branding as 'Charbucks', which is, of course, a widely-known derogatory reference to the giant chain's high-roasting technique. In court, the roaster claimed that he had chosen the name simply to indicate to customers that he used a dark roast, and the judge ruled in his favour.

(Does Starbucks roast too high? We were once chatting with a roaster in the truly near-legendary underground cave which made up Monmouth Coffee's roastery in

Covent Garden, and the roaster told us, with disbelief in her voice, that a Starbucks staffer had visited and asked: 'how many minutes do you roast past second crack?')

Starbucks once sued a Florida café for using the word 'venti', which of course the giant had popularised for its own 20oz drinks. The café owner pointed out that banning the word might have an interesting effect on its use in everyday Italian language.

A couple of states away in Texas, there was a battle over Starbock beer, which was brewed and sold by the Old Quarter Acoustic Cafe. Now, 'bock' is a real beer term, originally brewed in Germany; the new Texan beer came after a customer stumbled over the local beer names Lone Star and Shiner Bock. The Texan local papers were scathing about the lawsuit, one saying: "we need to reassure those poor folks who live in a part of the country where you have to drink caffeine shots to keep your brain from rusting. Hey, y'all - we don't know about you, but down here in Texas we know the difference between coffee and beer. Beer is colder and tastes better. And it's cheaper than your coffee..."

We would have thought that the chain would have been far more likely to win that case than the one it actually did in America, where it successfully prevented a woman from running a coffee house called Sam Buck's - even though Sam Buck really was the woman's own name!

One case it lost, however, was against the Haidabucks coffee bar, a tiny restaurant on remote islands off British Columbia. The owners of the bar had claimed that Haidabucks is a legitimate and traditional term for young men of the local ethnic background. The case was publicised throughout Canada and the USA, with t-shirts sold to create a 'fighting fund'.

Starbucks does sometimes suffer a corporate sense of humour failure. One such case was when *Playboy* made the announcement: 'calling all coffee-making cuties!', to attract baristas to pose nude. In response to Starbucks' complaints, *Playboy* innocently remarked it had done 'specials' on the women employees of Enron and 7-11, and that Starbucks employed 'many beautiful women'. A Seattle press reporter claimed to have discovered that the coffee company has a rule forbidding staff to talk to the press - but no rules against posing in the nude.

Here in the UK, we enjoyed seeing a local paper come up with the heart-stopping news that 'Saffron Walden is divided this week' - and it was the coffee trade that was behind it. Turned out there was a row over Starbucks applying to open in a redeveloped pub. It had all come from a typically over-the-top Starbucks press quote, where they were reported to have said: 'we're really excited to be opening in Saffron Walden'. Steady on, boys...

By contrast, when Starbucks entered Paris, the newswires were buzzing with speculation about its success in 'the home of cafe society'. The Canadian press commented sourly that: "the company might have to face a hard-edged French slur against watered-down coffee like the kind found in many U.S. diners: it's called 'jus de chaussettes,' or what is wrung out from soggy socks."

And we received another delightful piece of Starbucks-speak in response to our question about six stores in Ireland which had been closed. The chain responded: "the

recession revealed that for the long-term health of the business it was right to close them. We were able to redeploy employees who wanted to stay with the company. As a result Starbucks in Ireland is a business which is now in a better place". Exactly where, we have yet to find out...

Elsewhere, Starbucks was the target of a move to evict it from the Forbidden City in China. A politician there said the coffee shop, open there since 2001, was 'a challenge to China's tradition and culture'. Starbucks responded, in its typical corporate language, that it 'appreciated the deep history and culture of the Forbidden City, and had operated in a respectful manner... providing a welcome place of rest for thousands of tourists, both Chinese and foreign, for more than six years.' The local authorities quite tactfully did not point out the perspective that the Forbidden City itself is 600 years old.

The town of Excelsior, on Lake Minnetonka (a resort in Minnesota) actually began an advertising campaign with the theme 'secede from the Starbucks nation'. The aim was, quite admirably, to highlight the virtues of small-town identity as opposed to bland all-the-same modern clone-towns. In the local press, Starbucks was reported as saying they didn't understand it.

To be fair, Starbucks can suffer from duff reporting. We have often supported the idea that coffee should be covered more by the mass media, so one must applaud Starbucks' work in the States, where the company has worked with radio presenters from Boston down to California, offering them barista training and tutorials, backed up with interviews with the brand's 'global coffee educator'. With this in mind, Kaldi sympathises with Starbucks over the unfortunate phrase used by the Clear Channel Business Wire, which probably meant something entirely different when it wrote: 'about three per cent of the world's coffee is only good enough to end up at Starbucks'.

And curious media work and trademark claims are not all about Starbucks. In Singapore, McDonalds appealed against a court decision which allowed a local entrepreneur to continue with products named 'MacTea', 'MacNoodle' and 'MacChocolate', and so on. He had successfully claimed that the use of 'Mac' gave his products 'western sophistication'...!

More recently, the Hungry Hobbit café near Birmingham came under fire from the holders to the rights of works by JRR Tolkein. Pompously, the lawyers said that trademark law dictated that the firm 'had' to protect the Tolkein 'brand' - in return, it was pointed out that attacking a small business in the area where the author grew up might not be the most respectful attitude to his legacy. (The answer, it was suggested, might be a simple spelling change, putting one 'b' back to front as in the Abba logo).



The coffee trade turns up in court in the most curious circumstances. Rabbi Israel Steinberg's discrimination case against a New York café took 13 years to win, not because of long legal argument, but because of a backlog. Although the Rabbi had intended to sit at a table with his coffee, he had asked for his coffee to be served in a disposable takeaway cup, because kosher dietary laws say he is not allowed to drink

from something which may have been washed beside crockery with non-kosher food remnants. So he asked for his sit-in coffee to be served in a paper cup, and was told to leave. What was the good Rabbi doing, the fateful day he stopped for that coffee? He was on his way to a conference on anti-Semitism.

Nestle even reported its own brand for unfair competition in Australia. The local branch of the giant complained to the national consumer watchdog about the sale of Nestle-branded coffee in Aldi supermarkets, because those stocks had been bought elsewhere and imported. Nestle Australia said this was unfair, and as a result, refused to supply Aldi. The watchdog said it had to supply Aldi, because the supermarket had the right to sell both imported and domestic Nestle products if it wanted to. So Nestle was then placed in the position of appealing against having to sell its own products.

In Britain, a catering business advertised, quite understandably, for 'hard-working' staff – but this drew a complaint from the local Jobcentre, who said that it discriminated against applicants who were not hard-working. Yes, really!

The Israeli government brought a case against a woman for practicing witchcraft, after her customers complained that her prophecies, which came from reading coffee grounds, were not worth the price. She has been reading coffee grounds for 25 years, and several celebrities are among her customers. Israeli law, it was reported, cites a Biblical injunction against fortune-telling – however, her lawyer successfully argued that the law is inconsistent, because it is legal to offer advice based on reading the stars, but not on reading coffee grounds.

Some Northern Ireland greyhound owners were fined for feeding their dogs with caffeine in a bid to improve racing performance. They were given lower fines than other trainers who had fed their animals cocaine, that being an illegal substance – although, according to animal behaviour experts, cocaine would have made the dogs run slower than the caffeinated ones.

(On the same link between cocaine and beverages, actress Shirley MacLaine told the story of being at a flash Hollywood party and putting what she thought was Sweet'n'Low sweetener in her coffee. It turned out to be \$1,000-worth of cocaine. She wasn't invited back.)



Court cases aside, it has to be said that our news pages do very well from stories of general theft cases.

Coffee houses, like all hospitality businesses, suffer from vast amounts of theft. Quaglino's restaurant in London lost, in the course of about a week, a hundred customised forks, made especially for its starter course of snails. The same place also lost 28,000 of its custom-designed ashtrays in three years, and in exasperation, announced an 'ashtray amnesty', in which it offered a free glass of champagne to anyone returning one, together with a donation to Elton John's Aids Foundation. They recovered a hundred.

Most flash restaurants and hotels are used to cosmetics disappearing, but at the Essex

House hotel in New York, the superchef boss decided that customers should be handed their bills in a classy folder with a very expensive pen... the bills came back, and so did the folders, but not the pens!

The Savoy used to equip bathrooms with luxurious dressing gowns bearing the hotel crest. So many disappeared that they came up with a strategy - they put a sign in each room saying: 'if you would like a dressing gown with your initials under our crest, we'll have it ready for your departure at such-and-such a price.' Sales rocketed, thefts dropped. Another super luxury chain lost all the gold fittings from its bathroom furniture in one suite - the guest had been a senior manager in a furnishing company, looking for ideas.

I think it was Kit Chapman of the Castle hotel in Taunton who was once informed by staff that a guest was having all his meals in his room, and that the trays were coming back with the cutlery missing. He did nothing - but arranged that when the guest checked out, he would be very briefly detained at the desk for some spurious reason. In those few minutes, the hotel staff opened the guest's case, reclaimed an entire set of silverware, and in the best traditions of discreet English customer service, not a word was said!

In the coffee trade, we admired the story of the Baracca café in Norwich, where CCTV showed a man methodically removing and stealing the legs of each and every chair overnight. Some customers continued to sit on the legless chairs in an admirable show of loyalty.

We also admired the police in Maldon, who were quick to assess a case in which a car crashed into the Cherry Tree café. The local press quoted a chief inspector as saying: "we are treating this as a failure to stop."



A whole series of cafe-related series of stories which have now reached the courts in America, but which has yet to appear in the UK for reasons of climate - and possibly taste! - comes from the increasing trend for bikini-wearing coffee-house staff.

The whole thing started in places like the Cowgirls Espresso stands in Seattle, where it was the staff girls themselves who suggested a 'Bikini Wednesday', on which sales immediately doubled. The baristas were happy - they earn the minimum wage, yet could make another \$150 a day in tips.

As the trend developed to other coffee-house chains, the authorities did their best to take the girls to court as 'sex workers'. The owner of one chain threatened to go to the highest court in the land to protect his right to allow staff to wear as little as they want, but we suspect that he may have some trouble being taken seriously. His girl baristas wear only tassels, and his takeaway business is called 'Grab and Go'.

The sedate state of Idaho experienced a crimewave involving 'flashers' at topless coffee shops. One female barista confronted with such an exhibitionist customer reacted quickly, pouring him an extra shot - and not in the eyes. To our equal delight, King 5 TV news of Washington then reported that the Snohomish County sheriff's office were

confident of arresting the man who exposed himself to a local barista, because the girl had drawn a sketch... yes, that's what we thought, too.

And when the Java Juggs topless coffee drive-thru in Everett, Washington, was prosecuted for female baristas allegedly putting on strip shows for male customers, it was apparently without a trace of humour that the prosecution told the judge that 'the police have been watching the girls for months...'

Many of the stories which have developed from bikini coffee bars really are quite wonderful... you have all the respectable ladies of some mid-western American town harrumphing about the indecency of it all, and then you see a picture of a queue of pick-up trucks waiting in the drive-thru queue, and realise it's all their husbands who are driving the trucks! The baristas themselves seem perfectly happy with it all – one topless cafe was burned down, allegedly through arson, but the girl baristas enjoyed their job so much that they came in and worked amid the wreckage, continuing to serve drinks without pay, for tips only. This was, we assure you, the delightfully-named Grand View coffee bar.

The girls' efforts really did not deserve the cheap comment in a local paper over who might be responsible for the arson. The paper wrote: 'the waitresses couldn't have started the fire themselves – they're not that hot!'



Unfortunately, the really serious coffee-trade news is rarely as funny. There is no coffee-related court case like a scalding case, and this is no joke – not just because of the injury to a consumer, but from a café's point of view, it is a nightmare of reputation, insurance, and heaven knows what other repercussions. It is so dangerous a subject that one of our trade associations has actually refused to comment to our magazine on the subject – what it actually said, disgracefully, was: 'this is health and safety, and we're not going within a mile of it'. (By contrast, the anonymous Coffee Council produced a full report on it).

The classic scalding case is *Liebeck v McDonalds*. Stella Liebeck, a 79-year-old woman from New Mexico, took a cup of coffee from the drive-through window of a local McDonald's, and spilled it on to her lap, sustaining third-degree burns. She claimed medical costs of \$11,000, the fast-food chain offered her \$800, and she went to court where a jury awarded her \$2.86 million, although the judge reduced it to \$640,000.

The interesting thing the court heard was that McDonald's required franchisees to serve coffee at 180-190F (82-88c). Liebeck's attorney argued that coffee should never be served hotter than 140F (60c), which medically would reduce the time in which third-degree burns occurred, thus giving the consumer time to remove the coffee from exposed skin.

Does that mean we have to serve beverages unrealistically cold? Maybe not – in a similar British case, the court also heard that to avoid burns, tea and coffee would indeed have to be served at 60c. However, in a practical argument, the defence argued that beverages must be brewed hot to attain their flavour, and that tea and coffee

served at between 55c and 60c would simply not be acceptable to customers. The judge said: "on the evidence, I find that the public want to be able to buy tea and coffee served hot, even though they know that there is a risk of a scalding injury if the drink is spilled."

There was an interesting aside to the first coffee-scalding case to be heard in Russia. Apart from the fact that the claimant sought only 500 rubles (about £10) in medical costs, compared to what would have been millions in the States, the judge ordered an experiment in which the court went to a McDonalds restaurant to see how a person carrying a tray of coffee would pass through the door.

We recently reported an interesting problem from a coffee-shop manager who had a disturbing experience with sip-through takeaway lids - he discovered that lids were expanding from the heat of the beverage, and coming loose, with a consequent danger of spillage and scalds. Some lid-makers actually refused to believe him, but others came forward with extremely practical and helpful advice. At about the same time came the story which reached us through Karen of My Coffee Stop, the cafe on Enfield Chase station. A guy bought a takeaway coffee and said: no lid, thanks. The barista replied 'you have to, it's health and safety'. The customer responded: 'I've just come back from Afghanistan, I'll risk it'.

A few years later, the big scalding court case was to be immortalised by the Stella Awards, which are now given for wild, outrageous, or plain ridiculous law cases... or, as the organisers describe it, 'opportunists and self-described victims versus any available deep pockets and public justice system'. The Stella awards organisers accept that some entries are urban myths, but accept them anyway in the name of entertainment.

The best coffee-related one is that of a Mr. Grazinski, who was reported to have bought a brand new 32 foot Winnebago motor home. On his first trip home, he joined the freeway, set the cruise control at 70mph, and left the driver's seat to go into the back and make himself a cup of coffee. Not surprisingly, the truck left the freeway, crashed and overturned. The story goes that Mr. Grazinski sued Winnebago for not advising him in the handbook that he could not actually do this, and was awarded \$1,750,000 plus a new motor home.

Believe it if you like...



Sometimes trade news is serious, and sometimes it's dangerous. And sometimes it's uncomfortable or inconvenient to report it, which is why there is a dearth of 'hard news' elsewhere in the coffee trade. Essentially, every time a magazine like ours sticks its head above the parapet to report something inconvenient, we are in danger of getting shot at. That's why most trade magazines play safe.

It is a conversation we have frequently with all levels of the trade. "The problem," a coffee roaster said to us, "is that there is a huge lack of useful information in this industry. Instead, there's also a lot of garbage being spouted, and nobody's challenging it."

The particular subject which had aroused him was the constant one about statistics

in the espresso machine sector. There aren't any! Nobody really knows how many espresso machines are out in the field, and estimates range from 150,000 to 'millions'. There is said to be only one statistical resource, a report compiled by Italian espresso machine makers on their combined exports to the UK – but nobody believes that, assuming that each company will have massaged its own figures. One UK association did try to set up some kind of benchmark statistics for the UK, but of course nobody was willing to share any information, so that got nowhere. (Con conversationally, we can say that there are two Italian brands who make in the high thirty-thousands a year. There's another notable one which makes around 17,000 a year, and surprisingly, some of the most-touted names make only a thousand or two a year).

In the espresso machine sector, there have been several companies who have put forward claims of how many machines they have sold - and almost immediately, every single one of them has been greeted with derision by their competitors.

This puts us in a curious 'don't shoot the messenger' situation. We believe that every supplier to the trade must have their chance to put their argument... at least, so long as they put it honestly, and believe what they're saying, even if we ourselves think it's nonsense. There are some products we wouldn't touch with a bargepole, but the fact remains that for someone else, they may be perfect. Just because we like or dislike a product doesn't mean the next hundred people in the street won't have different opinions – so we say that our job is to put forward every argument, and let the trade make up its own mind. This gets a bit testing sometimes, when a company rings up to complain about something a competitor has claimed, and says: 'everybody knows that's nonsense'. No, it's not – we say that everyone in business has the right to put their case, whatever anyone else may think of it. (Although many people say that they can read between the lines of the way we phrase our stories!)

So, does the trade really want whitewashed PR nonsense, or does it want genuine meaningful reports, and the truth? Here may be a clue as to why the trade is so often fed sanitised PR waffle – because, for all the trade says that they want the truth, the uncomfortable fact is that most people only like to read the truth so long as it is not about themselves.

We regularly get into trouble for reporting things which some people would rather not see in print. On Christmas Eve I was washing Trudi's car for the very first time in seven years (a chore which, delightfully, I no longer have to perform as apparently I don't do it thoroughly enough... I forgot it had a roof!) when a very senior officer of a very big company indeed called to complain that we had (correctly) reported the departure of one of his senior managers. During the course of his complaint he told at least two blatant lies, and then emphasised 'we are your customer', clearly meaning that because he advertised in our paper, we should not report anything inconvenient to him.

We disagreed. We stuck by our principles. He withdrew all his company's advertising. We still stuck by our principles.

There is a lot of news which is extremely dangerous to report, but which we feel has to be covered, for the good of the trade (sorry if that sounds pompous).

In the autumn of 2010, an espresso machine exploded in a supermarket café in

Hampshire, resulting in hospital treatment for several people. Everybody knows the identity of the machine brand, and within the coffee trade, the matter is generally known as 'the Sainsbury's explosion'. Now, such an occurrence is extremely rare - it is thought by some that something similar happened in America in the 1990s, but we can find no record of it.

Anyway, the Sainsburys affair brought to attention the matter of the pressure-vessel regulations, which say (briefly) that an espresso machine is covered by certain rules, and must be inspected regularly. Many suppliers, notably Steve Penk at La Spaziale, say they have been preaching about this for years, and virtually every supplier agrees that the vast majority of cafe owners just don't bother.

(Even the question of who is allowed to inspect them is a minefield leading to great differences of opinion in the coffee trade; engineers disagree, insurance companies disagree.)

After the Sainsburys incident, the matter had to come into the open, and the Health and Safety Executive became involved. Now, we happen to know how little the HSE knew about coffee machines when they started the investigation, and we happen to know how it came to be that they then were led to consult half a dozen of the trade's foremost independent experts, as a result of which we devoutly hope that their eventual report will say something meaningful. So far, with their investigation ongoing and awaiting the results of machine-testing 'to destruction' (Sainsbury's have already done it for you, said one impatient cynic), we have come under criticism from just about every sector of the trade for reporting on this - even the HSE had a go at us. It's a subject so serious you would expect to see it reported widely around the trade press. But it hasn't been.

Should the frontline trade be given information on such matters, or not?

The state of the national high street came into question in mid-2011 with Mary Portas, TV's 'queen of shops' appointed by the prime minister to give recommendations on how the national high street could be improved. As our news pages are always filled with rows between local councils and the big three brands, who allegedly trample all over the local planning regulations, one would think the cafe trade would have a lot to say on the subject, and we enthusiastically recommended so. The pub trade's associations made submissions, and many other retail trades did so. From the beverage trade, there were two submissions - by Starbucks and by the Cupcake Cafe of Margate. Nobody else said a word. Neither, so far as we can see, did the rest of the relevant trade press.

Should the frontline trade be given information on such matters, or not?

A barista, Mike Haggerton of Perthshire, highlighted the truth behind the kopi luwak scandal - briefly, this concerns coffee which is eaten by the Indonesian cat, which digests the cherries and excretes the beans, which in turn are collected and sold for vast amounts as 'the world's rarest coffee'. (There are others - we have, ourselves, picked up monkey coffee in the Indian countryside). When some Indonesian farmers clicked to this, they captured the cats and now hold them under battery conditions, force-feeding them coffee. Mike quite reasonably proclaimed this as a scandal, which

we reported widely.

Nobody else said a word. Neither, so far as we can see, did the rest of the trade press. Should the frontline trade be given information on such matters, or not?

There are more down-to-earth examples.

Not so long ago, a recently-new company went bust - the boss-chap was actually well-known and fairly well-liked in the trade, and it was generally acknowledged that he had come up with a decent concept, but the funding had apparently dried up and left the operation suddenly without resources. We sent out an e-mail newsflash reporting, quite correctly, that a meeting of his creditors would be held on such-and-such a day.

We then received an angry phone call from the MD's wife, if you please, complaining that her husband was very upset at our report, and demanding to know where we had got the information that he had gone belly-up. Well, we're sorry you're upset, madam - but we got it from the liquidator's letter inviting us to the meeting, and we bet your husband isn't half as upset as we are, because we're among the creditors.

About five minutes later we received a phone call from another well-known name in the trade, a chap who sells a very famous brand of Italian espresso machines. He had received our newsflash, hurtled downstairs to his warehouse, and just stopped his driver heading off for that very same company with a batch of expensive equipment. In sharp contrast to the wife, this chap was ringing to say how extremely grateful he was for the timely warning, which had saved him thousands.

Sadly, we never did get paid.

So, how would you like your trade news? Real, meaningful, or sanitised?



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The advertisement features a vertical red 'KIMBO' logo on the left. The main text is in white on a black background. Below the headline is a photograph of a white coffee cup with 'KIMBO' written on it, sitting on a saucer with a small Italian flag. To the right of the photo is a short paragraph of text. At the bottom, the website and phone number are listed.

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This ingenious, manual coffee maker can produce perfect filter coffee in just a few seconds. Because the coffee is made under pressure, created by a tight rubber seal on the plunger, the fullest flavour of the selected blend is extracted. The filter ensures that the coffee is clear and velvety smooth with no coffee grounds in the cup.

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3. You don't know it all... The many subtleties of customer service

At a Coffee Summit conference presented by Allegra Strategies, the MD of Starbucks' British operation was in the middle of a typically enthusiastic presentation of how the international giant approached its community work. At one point, he showed a video of an 80-year-old widowed lady who was being interviewed in his Manchester branch, and she was talking about how the Starbucks staff there had been so kind, understanding and supportive of her on her daily visits.

A few rows back in the audience, the senior marketing chap at Lavazza, Barry Kither, whispered to Louie Salvoni of Espresso Service: "what you can't see is that just out of shot, there are two Starbucks baristas holding the old girl's budgie. One has just said 'say something nice about Starbucks, or the budgie gets it...!'"

Now, Starbucks will never stop telling you how great its customer service is (the word it uses is 'legendary') and how it 'touches the lives of x million people every day'. But for all the trade can make fun of the green giant, it has one thing perfectly right – customer service is not just important... it's absolutely everything. As another speaker at a trade talking-shop pointed out forcefully: "you people all keep talking about the perfect coffee, but the people who cross your doorstep have a different perspective."

Very true. For every diehard espresso freak who walks into a coffee house, there's a hundred more who are looking for 'a nice experience', which is why Starbucks has always said that it is not just selling coffee, it is selling twenty minutes of quality time. And that is the great clue for every cafe operator.

Ron Zemke, author of the *Knock Your Socks Off* customer service training books, was at a seminar in a hotel. He told us that during a break, he had asked the catering manager what the seminar attendees wanted during the break – the answer was 'quality coffee, well-served, served in nice cups on a clean table'. Then Ron asked the seminar attendees: they said they wanted quick service, near the telephones and restrooms. They didn't mention the quality of the coffee at all.

Lesson – we can't assume that what we think is important is the same as what the customer wants!



We used to have a friend who gave keynote speeches at American conferences. You can make a career out of that – construct one good speech, and deliver it over and over to every industry meeting in every top resort, ten thousand dollars a time, with all expenses paid. This friend had one good story which always worked, about how he

invited a top business contact out for lunch, and about how when he led him into McDonalds, the guy's face was a picture. Then our friend told him this nice customer-service tale:

He went to that McDs every single day for breakfast on his way to work, same order every morning. One day he noticed a bus outside and a whole coachload of silver-haired tourists queuing, and his heart sank. He unhappily joined the back of the line.

A couple of minutes later he heard his name being called, and looked up to see the manageress at the cash desk waving and saying 'your breakfast's ready!' He walked to the front of the line, knowing that all eyes were on him, and feeling like Someone Special as he was handed his breakfast tray. They had taken care of a regular customer... and will he ever go anywhere else for breakfast again?

Someone else told us of another remarkable McDonalds experience. She ordered a 'quarter-pounder extra-value super-duper bargain meal' at something like £3.19. As the girl fetched it, the customer realised that the fiver she thought was in her purse wasn't there – she only had two pounds.

She apologised to the counter girl, who asked how short of money she was. Company rules, said the girl, were that she could give the food if a customer was a few pence short, but not more than a pound. She thought for a moment, and said that as the customer still had enough for a normal quarter-pounder, why not just have that? But it would take three minutes, so would the lady please sit down?

Five minutes later, the entire full meal arrived... the whole thing. Sorry for the delay, said the girl – and as it had taken longer than the three minutes she had promised, company rules said that she was allowed to give fries and a drink to compensate for the delay.

The girl had found a way round the rules to give the customer everything she wanted. Now, that's initiative. No, it's sheer genius. That action kept a customer for life, and we do hope that girl went on to senior management.

As well as the need to produce faultless customer service, it is interesting to realise that this trade's customer base has changed, and not just in the way the hip and cool brigade would have you believe. A coffee machine marketeer tells us that she was talking to a trade customer in a chain of cafes when a coach-load of old people turned up. It was wonderful to watch, she said, because these old ladies became very excited to see that they were going to get a cup of good coffee. They clearly liked their lattes. The manager had a light-bulb moment, clicked that speciality coffee is not just for the under-50s, and brought in a training programme to cope with that kind of customer. The Real Eating Company, a chain on the south coast, has recently devised a business strategy around the same understanding.

The coffee trade always has to move with the public, we were told by Trygve Klingenberg, of Solberg and Hansen in Oslo, who once did a survey on this very same subject when he was head of the Speciality Coffee Association of Europe.

"What I didn't predict back in 1995, was the huge number of 30-45-year-olds who would get fed up with going downtown at night to get drunk and get laid, and would find it far more chic to go for a coffee on a Saturday morning and watch people over

the top of their newspapers! This drove an entirely new generation into coffee shops. And it happened in Russia, China, Japan, all over the world, at the same time."



What we do come across in the cafe trade is a lot of really bad customer service. We go to one heck of a lot of cafes, and some service leaves us laughing with frustration. In Bude, north Cornwall, we once refereed a debate between hotel staff as to whether latte should be made by putting the coffee or the milk in first. In a beach café barely a hundred yards away, we asked for a cappuccino. "We make it with filter coffee", said the manageress, and indeed a couple of Bravilor machines could be seen behind the counter.

Fascinated, we asked how she did it – we never learned, and no answer came because the manageress and staff were too busy arguing, loudly in front of the customers, over working conditions and staff treatment. Funnily enough, a few years later Taylors of Harrogate did a promotion of their After Dark coffee in which they recommended brewing it in a cafetiere, but topping it with foamed milk... someone said that Starbucks had actually marketed such a drink, with some success.

Writer Michael Baber defined the seven deadly sins of customer service, which ring terrifyingly true when applied to some coffee shops: *I don't know, I don't care, I can't be bothered, I don't like you, I know it all, You don't know anything, Hurry up and wait.*

The horrifying thing about these is that they can all be communicated without you knowing, in the way your staff use language – so, never let your people say 'no problem', because it's more positive if they can say 'I'll be happy to'. Never ever let them ask: 'do you understand?', because it comes across as 'I think you're stupid'.

Some places put customer-service reminder notices where only the staff can see them. In the heyday of rock'n'roll, an American hotel chain used to have a poster of a hippie behind the reception desk, with a slogan saying 'be nice to this man – he may just have sold a million records'. Rather nicer was the one we saw on the staff-side door of a pub in Bristol, which simply said: 'smile, you're on stage!'

Do managers have a clue what their staff are doing and saying? Sometimes they do - Fred Smith, founder of FedEx, used to go out in delivery vans as co-driver. Bill Marriott, of Marriott Hotels, would take a turn at the check-in desk and even empty ashtrays. (A Disney manager told us that all staff, including senior level, are expected to do that all the time!)

Bad service loses customers. A very notable chain involved in the travel industry reported that their chocolate machine had broken down. It was twelve weeks later that the supplier's man turned up to repair it, at which point he found that the Italian Beverage Company had now been installed as a replacement supplier, and were on the premises working on their own machine. His reaction, incredibly, was: 'good, that's saved me a job'. The new supplier's accurate comeback was: 'no, we think you'll find it's lost you your job!'

One of the greatest customer-service tricks of recent years was when the late David

Williamson devised the Coffee Police. This force was born in a Glasgow bar one night when Williamson and his team were telling each other stories of the bad coffee served around Britain, and wondering just what consumers could do to complain and stand up for their rights.

Suddenly the Coffee Police were suggested, as a kind of central online resource to whom consumers could complain, anonymously. Their 'complain here' website was registered within hours, uniforms and badges were ordered, and eight Chrysler Cruisers, which do look rather like old American police cars, were bought and painted up.

The 'police' were of course a sales team, and consumers who reported cafes serving bad coffee received prizes of badges or caps and jackets, while the sales team went in. (Not always successfully, it has to be said - they were chased off the premises on one notable occasion.) Their massive website of 'crimes against coffee' has now passed into memory, but at the time they were reported in graphic detail. A waiter at one of the world's most famous hospitality names told a customer that yes, she did know the coffee was bad, but once she had opened the packet, she had to finish it; a place in Torquay served instant coffee from cafetieres, hoping customers would not notice (we on *Coffee House* have had that happen to us, too), and an Italian venue in Leeds responded to complaints of poor cappuccino by telling customers: 'it's supposed to be weak!'

Our favourite report was by a consumer in Scotland:

"The cappucino was undrinkable and the sweet lady remonstrated with the manager who insisted that 'that's how they like it round here'," reported the complainer. "She got another one and it was still ****, but she drank it anyway. So she vandalised the toilets..."

By sheer coincidence, five years later, the Teapigs organisation set up a similar idea to allow customers to report crimes against tea, and reported enthusiastic response.

More recently, parts of the cafe trade have yet to appreciate the modern development of this - now, in the modern internet community, customers are invited to 'review' anything they've bought, from a dishwasher to a pint of beer or a coffee. Your coffee house may have already had a damning review on the internet, or even a hymn of praise, and unless you keep a close eye out, you may never know.

But if you do find out, it can do you good. As the 6/8 Kafe in Birmingham quoted to us: "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning." (It was Bill Gates of Microsoft who first said it.)



Of course, there are times when the customer is just plain wrong.

A new phrase has been created by retail consultants - it is 'firing the customer', and it means having the courage to stand up for yourself when you're right. But it's a tough call to make - how do you really know when the Customer From Hell is right, and even if you are sure, what to do about it?

Not so long ago in the States, a Starbucks customer was so annoyed with their service, and worse, their attention to his complaints, he ran advertisements in the *Wall Street Journal* criticising the chain and inviting other dissatisfied patrons to join him. He became a true Customer from Hell, and the lesson is that the even the most mild-mannered consumer, badly treated, can turn into a raging monster.

So, what do you do?

The late Joe Robson, founder of the Newbie Club (for the not-yet computer-literate) said: "I find it increasingly difficult to comprehend how this wonderful and abundant planet of ours manages to hold so many ignorant, ill-mannered people, carrying huge chips on their shoulders... if something goes wrong why scream 'rip-off' and why be abusive? Nobody is impressed by their antics and threats. I wonder why they get so obnoxious that I choose to refund their money rather than solve their problem. Because when I do that, nobody wins."

A roaster on the mid-Wales border told us that he had just dropped his biggest customer, who came demanding reductions in his cost price of espresso. Not only was he already on an extremely low price per shot, he had also just put his selling price up by 25p. And yet, still trying to screw a little more margin, he asked the roaster: 'so where do I go from here?' The brilliant one-word answer, probably unforgivable but delightfully understandable, was: 'elsewhere!'

There has long been a problem of coffee houses suffering with customers who use the free wi-fi internet service without buying anything. Some exasperated cafe owners got their own back through their making-up of access passwords – when someone who has their laptop in the shop asks for the daily network password, the staff can now shout back things like "BuyAnotherCupYouCheapskate."

It is not known if the stunt has helped improve the number of sales at the stores, but the staff feel better for it.



So, how do you satisfy a difficult customer, and if you are in the wrong, how do you put a mistake right?

The old maxim is that you don't know you've lost a customer until they've gone – as John Nelson, the supplier of warewashing machines for cafes, says: "the problem for a coffee house is that British customers still vote with their feet. You can spend hours practising your latte art, but spoil it with a dirty cup, and you won't see the customer again. In the States, they will complain, be given a free replacement drink, and be satisfied enough to come in again tomorrow – but in Britain, you've lost them."

Pat Fripp, the customer service guru (whose brother Robert was one of the most famous cult rock guitarists of the 60s onwards) told us that "if you roll out your red carpet for a billionaire, they won't even notice it. If you roll out the red carpet for a millionaire, they expect it. If you roll out the red carpet for someone ordinary – they tell everybody they know." (Or, as another American business writer observed, "business is a lot like tennis – those who don't serve well end up losing").

The received wisdom is that American customer service is better than ours. Kaldi reckons that this is because the Americans understand the cycle of service – they understand that the person who sells you a pair of shoes this morning may be the one you serve a coffee to this afternoon.

Another theory is that American companies are sales-based, and British ones are cost-based – the American attitude is to spend more money on premises and staff because they are confident that better service will keep their business full. The English attitude is not to put too many sandwiches and cakes on display, in case nobody buys them and they have to be thrown away... as a result of which, their display looks miserable, and so of course nobody comes in to buy them.

The world's biggest retailer, Wal-Mart (it owns Asda!) has a story that dates back to the founder, Sam Walton. He said he would always replace something unsatisfactory. A customer returned a faulty thermos flask, which was clearly an old one, but Sam replaced it anyway. The best part of the story is that he knew perfectly well he didn't sell it in the first place – but to keep a customer happy, he kept quiet.

Now, that's a lovely homespun story, but today many retailers are too wary to do it. Even Wal-Mart's own liberal 'return if not satisfied' policy is being changed, because the company alleges it has lost millions in customer fraud.

A typical story comes from a manager at a pub in Norfolk, Virginia, who told of a customer who frequently complains about the food, so vocally that she often gets let off paying for the meal. She once demanded a free lunch after having already won a free breakfast that same day. The manager was in a dilemma: "I could tell her, 'I don't want your business,' but I would lose my job instantly," he said. "Sometimes it's easier to give in to a customer than have them badmouth you all round town."

So what do you do when you really do have to give in?

Our friend Jack Groot is a coffee-shop owner from Holland, Michigan, who actually produced a customer-service training CD based on his own experiences with the way his staff served customers. He took so many notes of problems and how he overcame them, that he ended up becoming a consultant from his own experience.

"We make it a game to greet our customers first - if a customer says 'hello' first, we lose! It's amazing how often you can go into a store, walk around, touch things, look at prices, and walk out, all without anyone saying anything to you. It's our job to say hello first, not the customer's. We also make smiling on the job a condition of employment... and not smiling is grounds for termination. In the interview we say 'we smile here', and we don't relent on this one, not ever. When the customer sees, feels, and hears your enthusiasm you'll ring up a lot of sales."

Well, it's true that people don't like being ignored. This can reach extremes - a Taiwanese man died while playing games on his computer at a cafe, but neither the thirty other customers nor the staff noticed. He was found rigid on a chair with his hands stretched out towards the keyboard and mouse, police said. His body had apparently been sitting there for up to nine hours without any of the staff paying any attention to him. As customers, we have all felt like that, sometimes!

Assuming your staff do notice the customer, and do try to serve them properly, what

do you do when you get it wrong?

"I don't care who you are or how good you are, some day you're going to screw up," Jack Groot told us. "I wanted a consistent, professional way to deal with the times we screwed up!" He invented a voucher with the heading 'Ooops!' which has a blank space that his employees are empowered to fill in themselves, for a free drink or snack. At around the same time in the UK, Simon Martin of Quickfire Tableware began producing One Free Cup, which is a ceramic token that you can give to a customer by way of apology – it's redeemable for another cup in your own café.

However, it has now been reported that having to be nice to customers, whether they deserve it or not, actually causes depressed staff - the University of Frankfurt tested it by setting up a fake service centre and asked students to act as staff. Half of them were told they could answer back to rude customers, while the others had to remain polite at all times – those who had to remain courteous experienced noticeably increased heartbeat rates, even long after a problem customer had gone. A Professor Zapf from the university said: "It's about time we did away with the concept that the customer is always right and show more respect for those in customer service jobs."

Now, there's an interesting puzzle for a staff discussion!



There was, of course, the case of the Starbucks employee who took out his exasperation in a very public way. He wrote and recorded on YouTube a very entertaining song about the frustrations of the kind of people he had to put up with on the other side of the counter. Perhaps unwisely, he recorded it while wearing his company apron, and it may have been that which got him fired. He took his predictable dismissal very graciously, passing on as he left his respects to all baristas around the globe for what they have to put up with.

You can, however, establish your own service rules, and if you like, you can keep them strictly traditional. David Daly, owner of the Tea Cosy Rooms in Brighton, appeared all over the international press after his local paper published a story on the rules of visiting his café – he will not allow customers to put their elbows on his tables, use mobile phones, use fingers to handle sugar cubes, sip from teaspoons, or (worst of all) dunk biscuits in their tea. Among the list of forbidden practices in the Tea Cosy is conversation 'louder than two tones above the chink of a tea cup'. Anyone showing disrespect for the Royal family is invited to leave.

Our favourite part of the story was of the customer who attempted to break house rules by using his mobile telephone below table-top height – however, at that moment the proprietor walked into the room, the customer got up in panic, and banged his head on the underside of the table.

Is this good customer service? There is a school of thought which says it is – because it sets required standards by which everyone knows the score. When every customer knows the way things are done, no guest can be embarrassed or offended.

In the same way, customer service can be achieved by setting the character of the

venue. We were horrified recently to visit Huffkins bakery and coffee shop in the Cotswolds, and discover that some - but thankfully not all - of the table menu books were without a customer service page we have always enjoyed.

It reads: 'the staff at Huffkins are the most dreadful bunch of no-hopers you could ever have the misfortune to meet. You'll find them lippy, generally unhelpful, poorly turned out and sloppy in attitude. Regular beatings do occur in our staff meetings in an attempt to improve performance, but if you know of anyone crazy enough to want to replace them...' Well, when you read that, you know that you're probably going to enjoy the character of the place, and the way they treat you. (We were once in conversation with Topsy, the founder of Huffkins, when she said casually: "everything in this shop is made on the premises... except the staff, who are turned out in Hong Kong.")

This kind of good humour can set the tone for customer service. In the States, there is a curious tradition of 'paying ahead', which also comes under the wonderful subject of 'random acts of kindness'. In the coffee-bar sense, this means that someone calls at a drive-in, buys a coffee, and because they enjoyed their good service and banter with the staffer, they then leave extra cash so the next person to drive up can have one on them. In the best cases, this has led to the chain being continued for several days, usually until some grumpy so-and-so takes the free drink and drives off without a word of thanks. At the Steamin' Bean coffee shop in Blue Springs, Missouri, Garin Bledsoe told us of a queue which stretched to 8,000 customers, and the spare change which had accrued by people rounding up to the next dollar had also allowed him to collect \$2,000 to give to local charities.

(There is a similar practice by which a customer can do the same in a standard coffee shop, and the freebie can be chalked up on a board - apparently it's an old Italian habit called *caffè sospeso* which has recently cropped up in the Ukraine under the literal translation of 'coffee in suspense'. Any needy person can come in, ask if there's anything free, and take their choice from the chalked-up items).

Company good humour can also offset criticism. An American parenting magazine which wages a constant battle against coffee shops that are unfriendly to little children has had the good grace to laugh at a sign posted at a café in Kirkland, Washington. The sign says to parents: 'Warning: unattended children will be given two shots of espresso... and a puppy.'

Welcoming pets and children is an interesting customer-service puzzle in itself. Ann Croft and Jenny Roberts founded www.dogfriendlybritain.co.uk to promote all dog-friendly businesses, and told us: "we wonder how many millions in turnover British catering establishments are losing because they exclude dog owners." One notable British coffee-house which quickly put their 'dogs welcome' sign up was the Red Roaster, of Brighton.

"We're very fair," proprietor Tim Hume told *Coffee House*. "Our position on dogs is that there is no problem as long as they behave, and we have the same position on humans. We've had humans fighting and urinating on the floor, but no dog ever has."

(The matter of dogs in cafes has raised its head again more recently, with stories of baristas saying: 'we can't have dogs in, because of EEC rules'. There is, it turns out, no such regulation. Dog-Friendly Britain has said that every proprietor has the right to

choose whether or not they want to allow dogs, but café owners must not cite regulations which do not exist).

So far as the really big boys go, the notion of customer service is often better expressed by individual staff than by the management. At Starbucks, many of the management are programmed deeply into the organisation's cliché-ridden corporate-speak, not least of which is its self-created 'legendary service'. It was a Starbucks street-level barista who put this far better than her management could:

"This 'legendary service' isn't just being OK and friendly," she explained with admirable clarity. "Not everyone is temperamentally suited for a job as a barista, and in the long run, you cannot fake friendly qualities, especially under the pressure of a morning rush. 'Legendary' means going above and beyond – if it's pouring buckets outside, and the store is empty, and you see a customer's car pull up, what you do is this – you grab an umbrella, go and get the order, and then take it out to the car. And if they don't have the right change, then you save getting even wetter by saying 'it's on me today'."

OK, try that one on your own manager, and see how many have the guts to adopt it!

Certainly, some of the most attention-getting customer service we encounter comes from the giant chains. One of the weirdest bits of speciality coffee service we've seen was at the Costa roastery in south London, where their in-house barista contest was being held. In the entrance hall they had provided a little complimentary coffee cart, which was nice of them. I asked for a vanilla latte, and watched as it was made in a standard takeaway paper cup... no vanilla. As the girl handed it to me, I said, very politely, 'excuse me, but I did ask for a vanilla latte'. Oh yes, she said, took the cup back, took the plastic lid off, poured a slug of vanilla into it, jammed the lid back on, and handed it back to me.

We often visit the chains, to check their drinks and customer service, and it was one of the Big Two which provided the most awful customer-service failure we have seen in years. In Witney in Oxfordshire, I had picked up from the display rack what I thought, in the display light, said 'three-cheese panini'. When they'd cooked it and brought it to the table, I realised it was ham and cheese, and I'm a vegetarian. I went to the counter and explained. "Oh", said the manager, "that's a shame..." And that was it.

Now, that same author Ron Zemke, he of 'knock your socks off' fame, gave us his reaction to that. He said: "Their choices are -

- a) tell the customer he shouldn't have been so stupid
- b) explain that he mis-read it and suggest he buys the right one
- c) exchange it on the spot, for free, and if the right one is more expensive, give a discount on the difference to make up for the inconvenience.
- d) apologise, give a free exchange, throw in a free gift, and offer to wash his car.

"Options *a,b* and *d* are applicable to the kind of organisation that hires people whose IQs approximately equal their shoe sizes!"

We used the panini story in our magazine as an example for a survey on customer

service. Every other retailer who responded said it doesn't matter if it's the customer at fault, you always exchange the product and make sure they're satisfied. That way, they'll come back. (The only one who didn't reply was the brand that caused it!)

There has never been a funnier way of illustrating service going wrong than the first and best of the spoof-waiter troupes, Spanner in the Works.

The Spanner troupe make their living from providing corporate entertainment at flash dinners. The entire joke rests on the fact that diners who are somebody else's guests will be on their best behaviour for an apparently normal dinner function, and will not know how to react when they realise that there is something not quite right with the waiting staff.

For the attentive student of customer service, there are dozens of underlying lessons in this, because what the Spanners do is not a million miles away from the truth, and more than a few service-providers have suffered an uncomfortably awkward realisation of 'oh, have I ever done that?'

Imagine what the customer-service manager can learn from these examples of pure Spannerism, told to us by the troupe's founder:

As the customers arrive, they may be disconcerted to have to duck under a trestle held on two stepladders, on which a painter is at work, with his radio on and his copy of the *Sun* open at the nude picture on page three. (Have you ever considered what first impression you give? Just go outside your own front door, and look again!)

Guests will be even more puzzled to be offered wine from a bottle labelled White Sh**e, and they start muttering to each other when they see a waiter apparently taking a sly swig from a wine bottle. This is subtle outrageousness that is founded on what just might be true – do you treat the products you serve with respect, or do you treat them as if they're 'white *****'?

"The power we have over people is amazing," the troupe founder once told us. "Dressed as a waiter carrying a tray, I nudged one of 600 guests at the Hilton and just said 'shift yourself!' – and all conversation in the room stopped!"

"When we clear starter plates, our waitress will say: 'right, pass your plates up here', and all the guests in dinner suits will pile the plates up for her before they realise what they've done. Then she will put them all in one pile in front of a lady guest... and leave them there. Jaws drop!"

"A waiter will go round picking up their glasses, pouring half their wine back into the bottle – he tells them he has to recycle it, because the wine cellar has run out. Again, jaws drop!"

The serving of the wine is handled in a delightfully 'dodgy' way - the waiter will have a dirty bandage on his thumb, or will try to take the cork out with his teeth.

So, what does this tell the alert coffee-house manager? Look at your own staff and performance. How did you serve that cake? How did you handle that bottle, in front of the customer? Wasn't one of your own staff wearing a bandage yesterday?

Now, tell these to your staff - and see if they learn the lessons!

And if you think the hygiene aspect doesn't count, think of this. Once, while between

jobs, Kaldi did a production-line shift at a factory, very well-known in this industry, which makes muffins. The individually-wrapped muffins have a date stamped on the clear packaging, but every so often the machine would go wrong, and a few hundred muffins would be wrongly stamped. So they were unwrapped, and sent back to the beginning of the production line.

How do you think they got there? They were bowled like cricket balls back up the line and caught in big plastic baskets.

As you can imagine, there is one famous brand of muffin to be found in coffee shops which Kaldi will never, ever, touch.



The advertisement features a red background. On the left, a silver Marco EcoBoiler is shown on a dark countertop, with a water tap above it. Below the countertop, two more EcoBoiler units are displayed side-by-side. On the right, the Marco logo is at the top, followed by the tagline 'POURING PERFECTION'. Below this, the product name 'ECOBOILER' is written in large, bold, white letters, with 'Under Counter' in smaller white text underneath. A list of features follows: 'Full Eco features', 'Space saving', and 'Choice of Fonts'. At the bottom right, contact information for Marco Beverage Systems Ltd is provided, including their address, telephone, fax, email, and website.

marco 
POURING PERFECTION

ECOBOILER
Under Counter

- Full Eco features
- Space saving
- Choice of Fonts

Marco Beverage Systems Ltd
Shire House, Strixton Manor
Strixton, Wellingborough,
Northants, NN29 7PA.
Telephone: 01933 666 488
Fax: 01933 666 968
email: sales@marco-bev.co.uk
www.marco-bev.co.uk



CaffeCulture.com is a **FREE** online business resource that regularly attracts 3,500+ unique users from the trade every month.

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- Get a first hand account of the highs and lows of a 'start up' café

Become a member today at CaffeCulture.com/register and join the fastest growing online community for the UK's café bar industry!



4. Reverse ferret...

The joys of marketingmanship

Every single person running their own coffee-bar or tea-room is an 'entrepreneur' - it's a relatively-recent French word, about a hundred and thirty years old, meaning 'one who undertakes an enterprise'. These people are, in our view, heroes. And, because of the way they must be literally hands-on in every aspect of their business, in everything from brewing a coffee to scrubbing the floor and working out their accounts, they hold a phenomenal amount of practical knowledge about the coffee trade.

There are many like them in the supply end of the trade, too – people who have been willing to get their hands dirty, and can not just sell an espresso machine but make a very fine cuppa as well.

However, a depressing number of marketing managers, by contrast, are desk-bound operators who haven't the guts to look a customer directly in the face at point-blank range and couldn't make a cappuccino if they tried. That's one of the reasons why the people who run coffee shops know more about the business than their suppliers, a truth which has yet to occur to some of the big brands.

One of the great entrepreneurs of the modern-day coffee business is Howard Schultz, who had the vision of Starbucks as a worldwide leader before he even joined the company - indeed, the founders were just small-time coffee retailers and were so scared by the size of his vision that they decided not to give him a job, but he talked them into it. To be fair, Schulz has not shied away from doing complete about-turns when he thinks that he has got things wrong – there have been changes of mind over automatic and manual espresso machines, over breakfast menus, and customer service. He is a master of the 'reverse ferret'.

(That term comes from the daily press. Complete changes of mind and strategy were occasionally practiced by Kelvin MacKenzie, once editor of the *Sun*. To drive his editorial team to greater efforts, one of his phrases would be the shout of 'ferret up your trouser leg!' If he then changed his mind, the countermanding order would be a shout of 'reverse ferret!' In the newspaper trade, a 'reverse ferret' is now used to signify a complete about turn on policy, typically supporting something the paper had previously reviled, or vice versa).

I admire entrepreneurship, without actually wanting to be one. I once knew a chap who ran a dating-agency business based on very cheap small ads in the local press. Each ad would bring surprising amounts of lonely-hearts letters. He put the mens' letters into one pile, the womens' into another pile, and simply lifted one of each at a time and exchanged addresses.

I enjoyed the fearless entrepreneurship of Sahar Hashemi, part of the brother-and-sister partnership which founded Coffee Republic, who published a best-seller called

Anyone Can Do It, which essentially laid out the steps of founding her chain, all the mistakes she made, and the lessons she learned. Even though the Hashemis have not been involved with Republic for some years, Sahar still tours the country giving lectures on the subject to business organisations.

Despite the title, it becomes clear within the first few pages that Sahar herself is a trained lawyer with a brain the size of a planet, and their family was not exactly hard up. So you're not just 'anybody', we complained to her.

"People tell me it was alright for us to talk," she told us, "but we faced the same problems as everybody else." One of her entrepreneurial research projects was taking secret pictures inside New York coffee shops - for which she was humiliatingly thrown out, twice. Never, she told us, take a camera inside her cafe - she would spot a budding competitor instantly!

For the coffee-house operator, 'marketing' is a practical, grass-roots part of the job. It has nothing to do with college-taught marketing theory at all. (If you want to know the difference between the two, read the brilliant how-to books by John Richardson and Hugh Gilmartin, the *Coffee Boys* - the value of Richardson's teaching in particular comes from the embarrassing experience of having lost his own shirt in business, not least for concentrating on theory instead of sound practical common-sense).

Identifying with a coffee-house's frontline street-level marketing is a basic service often forgotten by suppliers. In the beverage trade, you would think that the coffee supplier should appreciate the make-up of a café-owner's clientele. They rarely do, of course... with some honourable exceptions.

Bewley's, the giant Dublin roaster, undertook one of the most imaginative customer-support projects to be seen in the coffee trade, when it gave its Irish independent caterers a seminar on how to compete with Starbucks, which was just about to open in Dublin. They brought in a speaker from the US, showed video interviews with those who compete against Starbucks in America and Australia, and the result was that their customers had a complete rundown on what they could expect from Starbucks. Not surprisingly, the seminar got a full house, and must have inspired loyalty among Bewleys customers.

Practical marketing for the high-street café is an art which college-taught theory comes nowhere near recognising. Typically, something which recently took off in the tea-room world is the phenomenon of the Red Hat Society, an international group of ladies of a certain age, inspired by the poem which begins 'When I am an old woman I shall wear purple, with a red hat that doesn't go and doesn't suit me.' A lady in Arizona bought a bright red hat, then read the poem, and gave a friend a similar hat and a copy of the poem... then the same gift to another. From that beginning, the Red Hat Society became immense. It is the biggest women's social group in the world, and in the UK alone there are 104 chapters, each headed by a 'queen' or 'queen mother'. And where do these ladies have their meetings? Always, invariably, in tea-houses. The consequence is, in marketing terms, a no-brainer for any catering manager.

Your own premises can become a marketing asset in themselves. Deep in an otherwise unremarkable industrial estate on the outskirts of Bologna, Italy, is a surprising coffee shop. It has outdoor tables under umbrellas, and the stylish young men of the

city roar up on scooters and in sports cars to hang out there looking cool. Among the coolest regulars, apparently, are the stars of the local soccer team. Inside are all the regulation requirements of an Italian café - stylish, sassy waiting staff, the traditional free snacks which will keep you going all day, and superb espresso made by people who have lived with it all their lives.

This is the Jakarta coffee bar - but it isn't a coffee bar at all. It's the brilliantly imaginative frontage for the La Spaziale espresso-machine factory. I was never able to understand why no British roaster or machine company ever took up the same idea, until Ian Steel of Atkinson's in Lancaster recently devised the idea of extending his roastery into a combined coffee-bar and coffee trade heritage centre. (One stresses the word 'British' - over in Dublin, the opinionated and imaginative David McKernan of Java Republic did actually plan his new roastery reception to feature an extremely light, airy, and well laid-out coffee bar. It works very well for both social and business-visit customers).

For the high-street caterer, the most basic marketing tools can still work. The most basic is still the loyalty card, an inexpensive strategy by which a customer is given a paper which is stamped every time he buys a coffee, and ten stamps wins a free drink. What is surprising is the number of times these are forged - you wouldn't think it worth the time and effort, but in the States, fake loyalty stamps for the Subway sandwich chain are actually sold on E-bay. Bids start at two dollars for a pack of forgeries that will get you fifty dollars' worth of sandwiches and coffee. A big scandal ensued in Florida when a public-opinion survey firm gave respondents an incentive of free-coffee vouchers for the Dunkin Donuts chain... they turned out to be forged.

One of our big three chains had an embarrassing problem with this. A barista queried a card presented by customer, and by appalling bad luck the customer turned out to be the mother of a daily paper journalist, who by awful coincidence happened to have an interview booked with the café chain's owner. The very first question was: 'so, do you make a habit of accusing elderly ladies of fraud?'

Variations on the loyalty card have begun to crop up. The Brew tea bar in Liverpool offered, quite legitimately, to take in any other café chain's loyalty card and exchange it for one of its own, with the same number of stamps. Meanwhile, the most imaginative idea came from world barista champ Gwilym Davies, who created the Disloyalty Card, to encourage drinkers to try various high-quality coffee venues in east London. A stamp from each of eight coffee houses in the area got a free drink from Gwilym's own business.

Quite typically, Gwilym gave the idea up when it came to be copied all round the country. He by then had moved on to other ideas, but we still see examples of the 'disloyalty' card coming back as if other people had invented it.

For some cafes, the loyalty 'card' has moved on to be based around the i-Phone, although Caffè Nero retains its paper version - it has a more tangible connection between company and customer, says the chief executive.

A lot of 'marketing' is certainly done by the kind of desk-bound operators who haven't the nerve to be a salesman. These people often work with a very sketchy knowledge of what they are promoting, and the coffee trade holds many examples.

There was, a few years ago, a trend for promoting 'shade grown' coffee as the great new environmental strategy. The idea is to grow coffee plants mixed in with other items, notably taller trees which protect the coffee from the direct rays of the sun, and which will also provide homes for birds and wildlife. Sounds great - but it only works in areas where the coffee is at risk from strong direct sun, otherwise it can be detrimental and can be a marketing nonsense. Steve Hurst, the 'Coffee Hunter', told us of the plantation in Brazil where shade is not required at all, because of the angle of the sun. But big buyers from the States demanded that the farmer supply them with shade-grown coffee because that would be their big sales line, so he obligingly set aside an area and cultivated the shading trees over the coffee bushes. The resulting coffee was not so good, but the buyers still paid a fortune for it.

One of the most entertaining marketeers the coffee-bar trade has ever had was Steven 'Barty' Bartlett, the 'accidental CEO' of Coffee Republic. He never wanted to run the company - he was simply so annoyed when they turned him down for a franchise that he became a very active shareholder... and ended up running the company. He said that Coffee Republic's progress was hampered by its marketing, which he re-named the 'sales prevention department'.

"Every company has one of these," he told us. "It's made up of the people who enjoy saying 'no', often because they didn't think of something first. One Christmas, when everyone else's gingerbread latte sales were going through the roof, I walked into Republic and asked about our gingerbread lattes - I was told, in a rather superior way, 'we don't do things like that'.

"Well, every company has people like this, and when I give talks to business people, I can see the looks on faces in the audience as they realise who their own 'sales prevention' staff are!"

He got his own back - he drove through a sticky-toffee latte just for the sheer pleasure of annoying the sales-prevention department. And it became a best-seller, too!

For the high street coffee-house, does marketing have to cost a fortune?

It was revealed not so long ago that the budget airline Ryanair had been quoted £3 million by computer consultants for the online booking system which handles all its transactions. The top man didn't like the price, and got it done for £12,000 by a student and a part-time helper.

In the same vein, Angus McKenzie of Kimbo told us that he believes in the occasional bit of 'make it up as you go along' marketing. He was organising a showroom sale of various items which had been clogging up his warehouse for too long - "I did a promotional video on a camera which cost me £80, and it took me twenty minutes to upload it to YouTube. Within half an hour I was getting calls."

(One wonders if it cost Kenco much to create their global-positioning competition. The company apparently inserted global positioning system devices in certain jars of its product, and opening the jar activated a message to a satellite, which told the company's marketing team exactly where the winning jar could be found. They then turned up and handed over £5,000.)

One of the very best examples of completely free, or absolutely lazy, marketing was

given to us by Roy Grey, of Capital Coffee Roasters in Wimbledon. He called us one day laughing his head off at an enquiry he had received - it read: 'My husband and I are planning on starting a coffee company in the north of England, and are looking for a roastery who can roast and develop coffee for us. The idea is that coffees are roasted fresh daily and shipped directly from the roastery to our customers. They receive an invoice with the order, which we hope you will create for us, and we manage the accounts. We would also like a telephone answering service - could you do this for us as well?'

Roy thought for a moment and replied thus: 'Your business idea sounds fantastic. If you find anybody that can do what you ask, please let me know. Then I could be like you and do no work and still get paid.'



Some of the most appalling marketing you will ever see is at trade shows. We won't tell you which ones - because one show has a manager whose mother is allegedly a white witch, so we're being careful!

The main show in the café trade is Caffe Culture, for which we can claim to have been in right at the beginning... I recall a furtive meeting in a station café, and the almost-whispered 'we're thinking of a trade show - what do you think?'

Several years later, they've put together a very respectable event, but as with all shows, you do have to watch the exhibitor staff who are dragged in to man their company's stands. Typically, be careful of what you are told by espresso machine exhibitors. An espresso machine presses water through coffee at a pressure of 9 bar, which is 130 pounds per square inch. I was once told by a lady on an exhibition stand that her machine would brew espresso at 200 bar - if that were true, the machine would probably take your skin off.

A London roaster tells us he was once at a trade show where an exhibitor really did tell him that his machine allowed you to put bad coffee in and get good coffee out!

Several exhibitors at Caffe Culture have asked if they are allowed to roast coffee on their stand - it's an interesting health and safety puzzle. Allen Dugdale of Coffee Direct was showing a new smoke-free roaster which allowed the aroma of roasting coffee, but no smoke. He said he looked up into the gallery of Olympia during the show to see a gang of extremely puzzled security men sniffing the air - they knew roasting was going on somewhere, but couldn't see any smoke!

The key to international exhibitions, I have been told by several long-standing marketers, is knowing who to bribe. Putting the odd tip in the right place will get your stand hoovered, and at certain shows, will actually get your stock protected overnight. I have known trade shows in other industries which, the exhibitors complained, 'leaked like a sieve'. In the height of the Filofax trend (those personal organizers that yuppies carried around shortly before mobile phones, at two hundred quid a time), the leading brand itself had its office-products show stand stripped bare overnight. There had only been the security staff in the building.

I often wonder about the end aisles at trade shows. They are so often filled with tiny

stands, poor displays, and bored staff... because nobody comes, the staff look bored, and because the staff look bored, nobody comes to see them. I believe that the occupants of faraway aisles should band together. If the standholders formed a 'Row Z Promotion Society', they could run their own events – there will be a big product launch in Row Z in ten minutes... the Row Z exhibitors will be naming their 'visitor of the day' in five minutes' and so on.

In general, all exhibitors at trade shows could do a vast amount more to interest people from the trade who take the trouble to visit them. Just have a look at the headers they put on their stands and count the meaningless phrases such as 'a complete range of beverage solutions'. Yes - but what people want to see from thirty yards away is 'this is what we do!' The whole point of putting forward a product at any trade show is to make the visitor, the cafe operator, think: 'that's a good idea - I can sell that!'



Although every industry has its share of marketing idiocy, there are still gems of marketing wisdom to be had if you listen carefully. Typically, we were once told by a very senior marketing manager at 3M, the office-technology company, that 'management does not have a God-given right to all the good ideas', and any senior manager with half a brain should plaster that on the wall of his fancy office. Similarly, a chap who was marketing manager for an immense company once observed to me that he is always careful of people who say they have forty years' experience. What you need to know, he said, is whether they've simply had the same experience forty times.

So sometimes you listen quietly to what experts say, sometimes you don't.

David Latchem, the founder of Café du Monde, once went to present his coffee marketing concept to a group of venture capitalists who lectured him about their investors being more interested in the character of the people launching his company than the concept. He was so annoyed at their dismissal of his coffee that he brought out a cafetiere and a pack of his best coffee, and brewed it for them there and then in their office to prove his point. Apparently they then understood.

We were taking a picture of Tony Waters, MD of the big Solo takeaway-cup operation, when he mentioned a rather negative bit of advice he had once been given by a senior manager. The chap had told him 'when having your corporate picture taken, never smile - if the press ever have to run a story about your business being in trouble and laying people off, and the only picture they've got is of you grinning, it's not going to look good.' Tony finished the tale and showed what he thought of the advice by beaming defiantly into our lens.

Paul Meikle-Janney, the highly-experienced consultant, once told us of the great risks of handing coffee-shop design over to architects, instead of coffee-trade people - you get the aggrieved reaction of 'you can't put an espresso machine on the front counter, it'll spoil my nice clean lines!'

Steve Hurst, the 'coffee hunter', who runs the Mercanta green-bean sourcing operation, got rather more useful guidance in his younger days. He once worked in the heart of a big city trading room. His boss wisely told him to learn everything about any business in which he was dealing, so Steve began to learn about coffee. It got to

the stage where he set up a little brewing station at his desk, and as the aroma spread, so did his popularity, to the degree that captains of industry would come in for a top-level meeting, smell the coffee, and end up discussing major business subjects by this relatively junior dealer's desk. (That same boss equally wisely instructed him to learn the languages of international companies he dealt with, and that the company would pay for him to do so. As a result, he can now go to a coffee farm and converse fluently in the right tongue).

Such wise guidance is the opposite of what you can expect from those to whom Jim Devlin (whose own place in trade history is guaranteed by being the person who drove through the concept of a City and Guilds qualification in barista studies) was referring when he told us pointedly: 'there are a lot of people who have made a lot of money out of coffee, without knowing the first thing about it.'



Your business name is a major part of your marketing. However, names which can seem clever at first can prove a hindrance in the long run - many people who put the word 'millennium' in their company names before 2000 look very dated twelve years on. And the residents of several conservative American townships took fierce exception to local openings of coffee shops by the Bad Ass Coffee Company. The owner innocently claimed that the name simply recognises the work of the donkeys who still transport beans down mountainsides.

Another coffee chain's marketing upset the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormons, by using a poster depicting an angel drinking coffee. The angel in question is sacred to Mormons, who are in any case discouraged from drinking coffee. The coffee house withdrew the offending item... and replaced it with an image of a hand pouring coffee, and the slogan: 'The Lord giveth, and the church taketh away'. (This is not the first curious product promotion in Salt Lake City. In the home city of the Mormon church, there actually is a beer called Polygamy Porter - it uses the marketing tag line: 'why have just one?').

Still on the subject of faith and coffee, another coffee bar whose name describes its business quite well is the unique coffee drive-thru in Idaho, USA, where the Rev. Al Holm runs the Sacred Grounds coffee shop in a state that requires only purchase of a licence for a legal marriage to take place. So Holm, a retired police chaplain, will give customers a five-minute wedding service with their coffee. A rather bizarre quote, from an ordained man, was that his weddings 'may include a bit of scripture', and he's been known to ask couples 'how much religion they want' with their coffee.

You always get a prayer with your coffee at a cafe in Yakima, Washington state, where one of those bikini baristas has turned Christian. The absolutely super, and slightly Old Testament name of her cafe is - He Brews Coffee.

When the C-Ice Swiss Cannabis Iced Tea containing cannabis extract went on sale in the UK, as 'refreshment for the enlightened', it reminded us of the launch here of the first cannabis beer, packed in tins - that was called, honestly, Cannabeer.

But some company names just ask for trouble. Gay Coffees of Kansas promoted some

fund-raising with its Fetish Beans, complete with the flag of the leather pride movement, and the tag line: 'whipping the charity out of you'.

By contrast, where business names are used for marketing in the UK, we find them quite whimsical. The *Coffee House* team takes enough interest in our readers to feel very familiar with the names on our circulation list, and there are certain café names we love every time they come up.

Café Alf Resco always makes us giggle - it's in Dartmouth, and very unusual in having Horlicks on the menu. There are a couple of coffee places called Baguette Me Not, and there's a Bean Around The World in Nottingham (there's also one in Canada).

We've always liked Sans Culottes, in Soho - the name is an old French derisory term for impoverished bourgeoisie, which probably suits us, too. The west country beach cafes have some good names - Life's a Beach at Bude, and the quite clever Nauti but Nice in Porthleven. We've always had a liking for Bread of Heaven in Pontypool, which its fans call 'the world's coolest little café'. The name is from the original words of the hymn also known as 'we'll support you evermore...'

The Octopus' Garden Café is a Beatles-themed venue on the Isle of Wight, which the owner says is 'the most Scouse cafe outside Liverpool' - you have to be careful of these themes, of course. I knew a pub manager who named his place Sergeant Pepper's, and had the full weight of the Beatles legal team down on him even faster than Starbucks go after someone who has dared pick a name close to theirs!

Presumably inspiration dried up when Coffee Something in Oxford was named, but I do like the sound of the Delicious Low-Fat Coffee Shop, in Northampton.

Although the barista known as Seamus McFlurry is quite clearly a genuine name (!), we do like the name of the place where he works, Coolaboola in Newcastle - it has an origin, meaning 'good', 'hip', or similar approval.

On the other hand, the Taste of Bitter Love coffee shop in Hackney always worries us a bit - we did reckon it was evened up by Love Saves the Day in Manchester, until that closed (though was later revived).

I've long liked the Dickens of a Tea Shoppe (Penkridge, Staffs), which has a themed menu, including the Tiny Tim Toasted Sandwiches. Not sure he would have appreciated being toasted, of course. I also like the gently punning The Blue Legume, in Stoke Newington - it is of course a vegetarian café. But where on earth did we get The Horse With The Red Umbrella (Dorchester) or Where The Monkey Sleeps (Glasgow)? A typical menu item from the Monkey is 'Tell Us About the Rabbits, George...' (it's a line from a cult film, we think, and in this case a brie-based veggie sandwich).

Tina We Salute You is in London, named after the sultry lady in a painting which the owners first used to advertise their original cake stall business. The Tickled Pink Tea Rooms are in Suffolk, and Ye Olde Naked Man café is in Settle, in the north, and its building dates from 1663.

In Edinburgh, Mary McDonald's Always Sunday coffee house is, she tells us, intended as a quite deliberately relaxing name for a 'third place'. Further south, Ken Quatermass's Two Toads coffee shop, in Gloucestershire, comes from a local tongue-twister: 'two toads, totally tied, tried to trot to Tetbury town'. A café in Ellesmere Port

has, admirably, helped out by hosting a support club for breastfeeding mothers. The club is called... Bosom Buddies.

There are also a couple of coffee bars called Nude. At an Irish one, a supplier won the coffee contract by going along appropriately 'dressed', and presenting in the buff. A tactic which we'd like to see some salespeople take up... but not all of them, thank you.

A near second to the company name in attention-getting is the use of external signage, particularly the A-board. These things cause the café trade no end of trouble, because local councils hate them, and will do anything they can to clear the pavement of them. What we particularly like is to see cafes make imaginative use of A-boards - and the leader in this may well be Adrian Jones of Street Coffee, who creates unexpected chalked messages virtually every morning and circulates photographs of them. A typical one reads - 'Fairtrade coffee... and topless girls'. Yes, he told us, he has had the police in a couple of times to speak to him about his less-repeatable ones.



For several years, one of the big marketing buzzwords was 'blogging'. For those who have happily managed to survive without these things, a 'blog' is a 'web-log', or a kind of online internet diary - to this day it runs in and out of fashion. Originally, these were for unfulfilled characterless souls, who found blogging to be a route to publishing their own 'dear diary' inner thoughts, most of which nobody else actually wanted to know. In time, they all 'subscribed' to each others' blogs, thus creating the 'social network' phenomenon, initially made up of people who have trouble with the real world. The same very much applied to Facebook (which was banned throughout many businesses, the security risks being too high) and Twitter, which was launched as an ultra-short online messaging service, originally based on the question 'what are you doing right now?' The latter was enthusiastically taken up by many 'cool' coffee types, but has become swamped by users communicating complete trivia.

(A Texas market research company analysed 'tweets', and rated 41 per cent of the content as 'pointless babble', which has been the main criticism of it. Too much of the content is at the 'hey, man!' and 'way cool!' level, and others complained they began to feel 'too connected', and began to question the usefulness of subjecting their contacts to the minutiae of their daily lives. 'How much of their trivia can you absorb?' asked one writer, and a techie magazine commented that 'Twitter is a technology that, in of itself, is neither good nor evil. Rather, it is the way so many use it that invites scorn'. Some users have turned to using it as a kind of shorthand e-mail system.)

It was when commercial companies re-visited the idea of the blog, and realised that it could be used to promote products, that things started getting interesting. When manufacturers started writing sensible blogs about their business, customers responded in far more conversational detail than could be expected. Companies, including some coffee roasters in particular, realised that the blog, if handled properly, written properly and edited properly, could provide a marketer with a form of list-building which could hold far more potential than a conventional database.

We chatted about this to the American marketing consultant Don Libey, who laugh-

ingly recalled that early blogs 'were written by crop-circle fans and weirdos writing about their personal experiences of cannibalism'. Now, he said, writing a blog had become a part of marketing to be studied.

"Customers responding and leaving their thoughts on a commercial blog are showing an affiliation with the company they're buying from, and are very likely to share more thoughts about their shopping habits," said Libey. "This becomes extremely powerful information which turns the traditional customer-list concept right round - your traditional list will reflect a customer's buying history, but your blog gathers information on what your customers think, and begins to help you find out the possibilities of what your customer might do next.

"This is the most powerful method of information gathering. You will learn more in two months' blogging than in two years of surveys."

Jonathan Yates, who invented a flavour-and-vitamins energy-drink additive for plain mineral waters, and devised the Fit For Work campaign to encourage healthy drinking in offices, found that Don was right. "I decided to have a blog about running my business - in my first weekend, I received 200 visits, and I discovered something very interesting. The British are said to be very poor at starting conversations - but they do like a reason to communicate. Give them the reason, and your customers will start talking to you!"

Many independent coffee roasters have found the same, and while a certain amount of coffee blogging still suffers from some of the crop-circle problem, and a little too much of the 'Finca la Santa Maria rocks, man!' school of coffee fandom, many suppliers have reported having very useful and constructive conversations with consumers.

Unofficial blogs related to big companies can be fascinating - those written by Starbucks staff can be extremely illuminating. Of course, big companies can get this wrong, too - WalMart was once exposed as having its blog written by a PR firm, and was exposed to public derision.

Probably the greatest missed blog opportunity in the coffee trade concerns the one written by Winter, the guy who is on a mission to visit every Starbucks in the world. By early 2012, he had visited 10,733, or 99.9 per cent of the ones in the US and Canada, and others in various parts of the world, but he told us that the quest goes on, every time they open a new one.

When he was doing his UK tour, he told us that the corporate Starbucks keeps him at arm's length, and we really couldn't understand why - surely anyone who has visited ten thousand coffee-houses has a head and a notebook full of absolutely priceless marketing information?

Then we read the blog. It's a largely personal diary, all about his troubles about getting overcharged for car hires, and the horrible hostels he stays in during his quest, and the impossibility of getting a burger in Zurich. Very little about Starbucks' coffee. We asked him some questions about Starbucks in the UK, and although he had been to every single one of them, we were puzzled that he didn't give any insightful answers... and then we realised that he doesn't look at the things we're interested in.

Now, if Starbucks had taken an interest in this blog, and guided him to the things it

would have been helpful for them to know, he could have reported in great detail on the branches, their coffee, customer service, cleanliness and things like that. He would have been the trade's ultimate mystery-shopper, Starbucks would have put him on the payroll a long time ago, probably at a very large fee, and his blog would be the definitive observation on Starbucks coffee-houses around the world.

What a missed opportunity...



One would always hope that an industry's trade associations would contribute vast efforts to the marketing of its industry... however, we will simply refer here to a very senior MD of our acquaintance, who has compared the marketing work of certain hot-drinks trade bodies as 'roughly the equivalent of a high-street charity shop'.

This can, of course, be a relief, compared to the marketing work of some so-called trade bodies who exist purely for the purpose of sucking money from their members. Kaldi was once hired (and left within the week) by a 'trade body' which had devised a nice scam. The business was in an area of office technology and offered evaluation of certain printing equipment in its 'laboratory' - to be precise, that was a lock-up garage in an industrial park, where a chap fed papers through various printing machines all day.

The organisation would 'officially rate' the performance of machines with something which came remarkably close to what the manufacturer claimed for them, and the manufacturer could then apply for 'rating certificates', the kind you see framed in showrooms up and down the country. A nicely photocopied certificate on what looked like vellum, with a little bit of what looked almost like gold embossing, was priced at £20 - for a manufacturer member to take one for each of a hundred showrooms, came to a nice little earner for the trade body. The certificate meant nothing, of course. One major company objected to what it recognised as blackmail, refused to pay up, and was pilloried and lambasted in that trade body's own magazine for years to come. That's one reason our magazine has always resisted the urge to 'approve' things in the beverage sector!

In coffee, many people in trade associations have lamented for years that we don't get enough coverage of the trade in the mass media - once in a blue moon, a champion barista appears on a TV cookery show as a kind of novelty act, but that's all. The trade can't really complain, because nobody has ever put in any serious effort to achieve anything better.

But these things can be done... just consider the possible development, using the extremely unlikely parallel of Beer Talk Radio, which we discovered coming from a radio station in Cleveland, Ohio. Here, Jac Curtis and Larry Eddy told us how they had taken the subject of beer, and turned it into a late-night talk show in which the two of them addressed every possible aspect of the subject of what the Americans call 'suds', and at times hit audience figures of 60,000. Local bars would actually turn off their TV and juke box and tune in so their customers could listen.

While certainly discussing such issues as yeast and hops, the two brought in some fairly hefty social issues, and Jac told me that they came across as two ordinary guys in a bar, discussing topics of the day. Brewers queued up to be associated with them, and you can see how a coffee equivalent could work... except perhaps in the example of Jac and Eddy's most famous show, in which they campaigned against president Bill Clinton, who had ruled that breathalyser blood/alcohol levels should be lowered.

"President Clinton said the standard should be lowered to eight-hundredths of alcohol in the blood," Jac told us. "I said on the show that this was wrong – one beer would take me over the legal limit, while in fact I would still be capable of driving. This began a debate over how many beers it takes to become incapable, and we realised that if we were going to argue the case, we had to do so from an informed position. So the test would be that I would drink four ounces of beer at set intervals during a live show, and we had a professional medical guy with a breathalyser who would test me every ten minutes."

The result surprised the presenters, the listeners, the beer industry and local politicians. It took Jac Curtis five and a half beers to reach the proposed standard, and by the time he reached the level of 0.08 per cent alcohol in the blood, the level he had argued was too low, he was clearly well out of it. And by the time he spoke the last sentence of the show, he had radically changed his opinion. We still have his final words on tape:

"At this point," he told his radio audience with deliberate and precise clarity, "I am not fit to be sitting behind the vehicle of a wheel..."



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5. Believe it if you like - PR-waffle and the coffee trade

So, if you run a coffee-house, why do you need a trade newspaper? And what is 'news' in the coffee industry, anyway? And do you believe what's printed in a trade magazine?

In the days when Kaldi was still goatherding, trade magazines didn't bother about 'news'. They reprinted a few meaningless press releases, reported the occasional trade dinner, safe pictures of people shaking hands, and ran away from anything at all controversial. And indeed, we all know magazines who still work that way.

When we launched *Coffee House*, one senior trade person, heading a trade association, told us: 'I don't need a trade magazine. I know everything that goes on'. What incredible arrogance! And what blindness, and criminal thoughtlessness from someone who was supposed to take responsibility for the business welfare of an industry.

Because the truth is this – even in the age of the information superhighway, (today's Twitterati may be too young to know that term from the early days of the internet!) there are very few information routes for the independent coffee-house or tea-room owner. There are a few little cliques who consider themselves at the top of the trade, and think they are the people who really count, but for thousands of high street businesses up and down the country, where do they get their business information? From suppliers' reps, and maybe from magazines who print manufacturers' press releases. And you may possibly consider that neither of these are a neutral reliable source!

In 2006, we discovered, to our surprise, that a great number of coffee-houses, and particularly tea-rooms, were not on computers, and were not on e-mail. By 2010, I thought this had changed - and was brought up rather sharply to realise it had not. We realised just what a coffee roaster friend meant when he said: 'to my independent customers, you're a lifeline'. It was only in late 2011 that research by the Caffe Culture organisers began to show that this was changing, and more cafes were coming online.

Many coffee people converse on Twitter, but that can't do everything. A few years back, we were speaking to Bob Poole, of the old Trenance Tea Rooms in Cornwall, who had struck up an acquaintance with the couple who used to run the Bird on the Rock, another award-winning tea-room in mid-Wales. Bob said: "you wouldn't understand the relief of being able to ring someone like that after a hard day, tell them what went wrong - and they understand, because they've been there!"

So, we know the cafe trade wants information, it wants contact, and it wants news. It doesn't tweet, and it doesn't read blogs. But where does the majority of trade 'news' come from? And is it reliable?

It is generally believed - wrongly - that much of it comes from PR agencies. Well, it is true that there are a vast number of agencies putting out information from suppliers to the cafe trade. We know the great majority of them, and, while we have some very good friends among the PR community, and while we do know several who are

very good at their job, the unfortunate truth is that a great number of PR people don't know the first thing about the coffee industry, leading to many of our most entertaining (and exasperating) moments.

Now, the beverage trade is a writer's dream - it has topics, business issues, product ideas, personalities, humour, and on one occasion some of us can remember, physical violence. It has everything a decent editor could wish for, except perhaps a sports page.

The essence of the public-relations job is to take all this fascinating information, edit out all the character, distill it down into a few standard clichés, add a few unnecessary adjectives and superlatives, try and get someone like me to publish it, and then charge the client a fortune for the result. And this means that you, dear trade reader, are being fed pure bullshit on a disturbingly regular basis.

The relationship between some press agencies and those they represent was summed up best of all by my friend Mark Eltringham, who runs Front Marketing up in Cheshire. Mark has been poacher, gamekeeper, and something in the middle, as first a marketing manager in a big industry, then editor of a well-regarded trade magazine for that industry, then a PR and marketing consultant.

He told us: "credibility is always the interesting paradox in publicity. My biggest problem is trying to win business against PR people who promise all sorts of stuff, to marketing people who really should know better". The process, he said, goes like this:

Client: We need a PR firm that can get us regular coverage in the trade media.

Mark's agency: We can do that. Look, here's loads of coverage, here's who we know and here's our references.

Penelope and Fiona PR, Kensington: We can get you a television series, the cover of *Hello!*, the monthly opportunity to snort cocaine off the taut, flat stomach of a nineteen-year-old Thai virgin, and free sponsorship of the Grand National.

Client: You're hired!

Twelve months later:

Client: What have you done for all the money I paid you?

Penelope and Fiona: Bugger all apart from making some daft promises, but we did enjoy the Sancerre and the money for old rope.

Client: You're fired!

Penelope and Fiona: That's alright, we've already found the next mug.

Client: I'll never use a PR agency again.

Repeat, over and over again...

To be fair, not all PR agencies are like this - those media minxes who really do try to come up with genuinely informative items, which both I and the coffee trade want to know about, are a joy to work with. But they are definitely in the minority.

So, with great respect to those in the PR sector who really are our friends, what gems

of their colleagues' 'information' have we managed to prevent from being passed on to our readers in the coffee trade?

The following is, we promise you, an absolutely true account of an exchange with a very big and very expensive PR agency of London, concerning an espresso machine supplied by a well-known company we dare not name. The PR bimbo had told us the machine featured an item called something like the TikTak automatic frother.

Me: How does the TikTak work?

X pr: It froths the milk to a deliciously creamy texture.

Me: Yes - what I meant was, how does the machine do that?

X pr: It uses the TikTak.

Well, you can see what we're up against!

What we had there, of course, was an agency which didn't understand the product. I once had a very similar exchange with a PR agency working for Dyson, the vacuum cleaner people. The first Dyson featured something called the Dual Cyclone technology. I called them up and said I'd like to know about the technology in the machine. They said 'it's the Dual Cyclone technology', and I said yes, but how does it work? The PR girl on the other end, sounding slightly puzzled, said 'it's dual-cyclone'. Yes, I said, but how does it work? In tones as if she were talking to the village idiot, she shouted at me: 'it works with Dual Cyclone technology !!!!' and slammed the phone down.

The agency for another very well-known coffee brand sent us a stream of praise of a certain new coffee, thus: 'X Fairtrade coffee is sourced from the highest plantations, where the beans are sun-dried and traditionally slow-roasted to exact specification.' Is it really? Have you ever heard of any coffee at all which is slow-roasted at a high plantation? Nonsense – that one was roasted in Kent.

If you don't know what you're talking about, you can always rely on what sounds like a 'cool' phrase to get you through. Very recently, we had a press notice about a milkshake which referred to 'the interactive drinking experience'. That, we worked out, was the drinker interacting with the drink... by drinking it.

A press release on behalf of a big UK coffee company appearing at the Caffe Culture show began: 'Don't know your mocha from your macchiato...?' Now, just think about that for a moment. There were 4,433 visitors to Caffe Culture, of whom I reckon 4,000 were in the beverage trade. (The rest were PR agencies trying to find clients). The bimbo who wrote those words failed to appreciate that the vast number of people at the show most certainly know a mocha from a macchiato, which I suspect she doesn't. (And neither did another trade magazine, which printed the press release!)

Before that same Caffe Culture show I think we had four press releases which included the phrase, or something like it: 'so drop by the X stand at Caffe Culture and relax over a delicious cup of coffee'. Think about it... trade visitors to a coffee show have been tasting coffee all day. They may need a beer, they may need speed, but what they certainly don't want is yet another coffee!

And finally, that leads into one of our favourite pieces of standard PR lunacy. Yes, it has cropped up again this year: "... So, put your feet up, and relax with a cup of X

coffee, in your favourite mug..."

I wonder what it will take to get it into the head of the bimbo who wrote that, indeed all the bimbos who have used that phrase, that they are not writing for people who put their feet up and relax with favourite mugs? They are writing for hospitality-trade people who may make and serve 200 cappuccinos in a lunch hour. What are you going to think, dear café owner, when you have just spent all day sweating over an espresso machine, and some idiot supplier suggests that you sit back and relax over yet another coffee?

If you're a café owner, you have a right to be exasperated at being talked down to like this. If you're a supplier to the café trade, don't laugh – you're the one paying for this rubbish.

There's a serious point to this, of course – it shows that a lot of PR people don't understand the difference between writing for a consumer who's likely to *buy* a product, and writing for a trade audience who are required to *sell* it. If any of them realised that, we might have been spared the big-brand coffee website aimed at trade customers which featured a how-to section, teaching the café trade how to pronounce certain coffee terms, including, believe it or not, 'espresso'.

Even more exasperating are the highly-unrealistic 'quotes' made up by PR agencies, supposedly spoken by their clients - they would fill a book in themselves, but we do have some favourites. Do you think this press-release turn of phrase was actually spoken? Tri-Star's managing director Kevin Curran, who distributes cups and takeaway packaging, is supposed to have said: "as innovators in food packaging, we pride ourselves on thinking outside the box..."

The Bev-e café awards (which the BSA ran until 2010) threw up a similar piece of PR-writer nonsense when one winner supposedly referred to their coffee supplier, David Wiggins from Cappuccino Rapido, as having provided great support to them. They supposedly said: "his Fairtrade Arabica Reserve remains our favourite bean, and has literally stunned our customers..."

Literally? We're surprised David didn't get arrested.

(Made-up quotes truly can run to book length. It is said, by a very reliable source, that one of the most famous 'how to' books on running a coffee shop, supposedly written by the founder of a well-known brand, was not written by them at all, even though their name is on the cover. The CEO of that particular chain happened to give the game away to a coffee-shop operator at a trade meeting – the guest turned white and said the book had been her 'business bible', and the writer was her hero. The CEO still has nightmares about shattering her dream.)



We shall draw a veil over the PR work surrounding the big chains' launch of the Flat White. No, on second thoughts, we won't... it's far too funny to leave out.

The flat white is a drink which originated in Australia and New Zealand, and is a kind of strong latte, with particularly smooth and creamy milk. Several of the

Antipodean cafes in Soho and Covent Garden were serving it to Aussie expatriates for ages before the big brands noticed.

What happened then was that two major chain names desperately tried to be seen as leaders in picking up the drink, and in trying too hard, both over-reached the bounds of PR credibility. It should give us all a lesson that publicity has to be credible, or the entire trade is in danger of being derided – and indeed even the daily papers took the mickey out of the coffee trade for this one.

First, Starbucks' press machine came up with the quite folksy story that the baristas in one of their Soho stores had noticed people asking for 'a new drink', and that their 'highly-trained baristas' had taught themselves to make it. That could well be true, but is unlikely – baristas in an organisation like Starbucks would not put a new drink on the menu without a corporate directive, and anyway, teaching oneself how to make a flat white is a truly admirable achievement.

The true source of that product launch was probably at the Allegra summit in London some months earlier, where the 'flat white' drink was discussed in public for the first time. Asked after that meeting whether Starbucks would take it on, their MD replied: "We don't have any immediate plans to do so, but if the demand was there from our customers we would certainly consider it." Barely five months later, they did so, which was perfectly reasonable - but they felt it necessary to concoct an unlikely story to go with it.

And that was followed by an equally unlikely story, when Costa's effort went too far the other way. According to a Costa statement, they put in 'more than 12 months of research, development and training of over 6,000 of Costa's baristas at a total investment of over £1 million'. That is a statement which left the rest of the trade incredulous. The timing and the figures do not make sense, even for an enormous corporate... and if one of the two high-street giants would have you believe its baristas could learn to make a 'flattie' by themselves, then why did the other have to spend a year and a million pounds on it?

The chains' launch and counter-launch were equally confusing. Starbucks brought the drink out in London on 7th December, and by 20th March were running a competition in the Welsh press to mark its launch in Cardiff. It was a week later that Costa held its own launch, saying: "we are offering a premium, great tasting and authentic product that's not available at other coffee shop chains in the UK. Our unrivalled coffee expertise and highly skilled, talented baristas make us unique in our ability to offer an authentic Flat White".

How could it be unique, protested traders from all round the country. Muffin Break reported having sold the drink for eight years, and even a one-man coffee-stall operator in Wales said he had been selling it for over a year.

It was extremely unfortunate that Costa had enlisted TV celebrity Peter Andre to promote its launch, although he was only booked to 'serve' the first five customers with the drink. "I'm guessing the Peter Andre thing was an attempt to link the flat white to Australia?" Barry Cook of Cafelicious in Swindon wrote to us. "If it was, it may be worth pointing out that he was born in Harrow!"

However, it cannot have been Costa's fault that the celeb's PR representatives got heavy-handed with the media in advance, reportedly telling the gossip pages of the nationals that 'under all circumstances, coverage of Andre has to be of positive text and picture captions'.

It was the Telegraph which lampooned this most cruelly, even captioning a picture with the words: 'the bad pop singer Peter Andre'.

(Not long afterwards, Peter Andre opened his own coffee house in East Grinstead. We have not been favoured with an interview!)

It was equally unfortunate that Costa had also decided to invite some coffee writers to their roastery, where they could learn how to make the coffee and be taught latte art. One such generous invitation went out to a barista who holds two British championship titles and one world title.

There was, to be fair, some quite mischievous work done to Costa by senior managers in the trade. We know for a fact that at both ends of the country, certain people went into Costa and asked for a flat white, then, when it was served, rejected it on the grounds that they wanted one which looked like the A-board outside... which was, of course, showing an absolutely superb piece of latte art.

(Rather charmingly, we had a latte art experience in our own local Costa. The young chap poured the milk with intense concentration and then looked up and shouted to all the other staff: 'hey, I almost got the picture on the top!' In truth, we admired the lad's enthusiasm).

But possibly the best flat white story was reported by one of the many senior managers in coffee companies who did their own investigative buying missions. He reports being told by a Starbucks barista that the idea of a flat white being an antipodean drink is nonsense: 'the flat white started in Britain, was stolen by the Aussies, and now Starbucks has brought it back.'

Good grief... so who are you going to believe?



When all else fails and PR agencies run out of inspiration – which for some of them is every five minutes – they will regularly resort to surveys and 'research', with hysterical findings. Our spirits sink whenever we read the words: 'a new survey reveals...'

With due respect to those researchers whose work is honest and credible (and they do exist) there is some research which just does not stand up, and everybody knows it. We always query stats which sound odd, and in one story we were writing for a pub trade newspaper, we were puzzled by a reference to 50,000 venues doing something every week. When we queried it, we were told: 'downgrade it to 20,000 if you think it sounds better'!

There was a coffee-trade parallel when Starbucks claimed that a quite unlikely 35 per cent of the British population go into coffee shops every week; that's twenty million people a week, and critics have pointed out that the 'economically active' population numbers are highly unlikely to give anything remotely near twenty million individual customers. However, the figure has now been repeated so often that it has become

accepted. When we recently had it repeated to us by a senior marketing manager at a very big Italian brand, we protested: 'surely you don't believe that?' With a straight face, he replied: 'of course I don't, but that doesn't stop me using it when I think it might be helpful'!

A survey by Starbucks in New York 'revealed' that one office worker in three has stolen a colleague's lunch sandwiches. What puzzles us is... why the hell did they ask the question? Unilever and the Institute of Psychiatry in London did what was called 'an expensive but small piece of research' which 'revealed' that the processing area of the human brain reacts positively to a taste of vanilla ice-cream... what a discovery!

Elsewhere, a university professor and three of her students spent 60 hours watching customers in Canadian coffee shops, and presented their findings at a massive educational conference – they reported that 'coffee shops sometimes function as information grounds, where both everyday life information-sharing (current events, health and nutrition) and gossip (a special type of information sharing centered around family, friends, work colleagues and acquaintances) takes place.' Good grief....

A milk company commissioned research by the University of Northumbria into 'the perfect cup of tea'. It reportedly took the researchers 180 hours of work to pronounce the following: the best method is to add boiling water to a tea bag in a mug and leave for two minutes, remove the bag, add milk and leave for six minutes until it reaches a stated 'optimal temperature' of 60C. A senior lecturer was reported as claiming that his taste panel reported prevalent wood and grass flavour notes in black tea, but the addition of milk significantly replaced these with toffee and vanilla. Astonishingly, the research went on to say that if tea is left for 17 minutes and 30 seconds, it will be past its best. The tea trade will be staggered to learn that the 'perfect' cuppa involves a tea-bag, never mind a mug, and that many of the world's greatest teas, which do not work with milk, must presumably be discarded...

Another piece of 'did they get paid for that?' coffee research which shot round the trade was reported on behalf of a giant brand, and which triumphantly 'revealed' that the most popular time for a coffee break was mid morning... and that the second most popular was mid-afternoon!

The strange thing is that nobody needs to write this nonsense. The real facts are often more entertaining than anything else. In all industries, the most unlikely products have great stories behind them, and it's such a pity the PR industry rarely gets to the real story. For example, who was behind the development of the paper clip? It was, believe it or not, the mafia – a tiny company in Chicago was working on the product when the mob needed a way of laundering money. They 'invested' in this tiny little concern, which is today one of the biggest companies in office products... now, that's a real product story!



Although a lot of nonsense is passed around the coffee trade, it would be unfair to say that it's only the PR industry which gets things wrong. The press can come up with its own absurdities, all by itself.

A certain coffee roaster keeps one single coffee-plant growing in his reception area, because it's a conversation-starter for visitors. It's a couple of feet tall. The local paper had decided to do a 'business feature' on the company, and their reporter stayed all day. A couple of days later the roaster got a call from the paper's editor: 'we just want to double-check – all the coffee you roast comes from that plant in your reception?'

There was a fascinating story in a very famous international finance magazine which described Gerry Ford, head of the Caffe Nero chain, as a self-made billionaire who buys and sells banks for millions upon millions of dollars, apparently owns most of Texas, and runs his coffee-bar chain as a pastime, like boys run a train set. When we enquired about this at Caffe Nero, we were told - 'that appalling rag can't check it's facts - it's a different Gerry Ford!'

We ourselves accidentally managed to embarrass the right Gerry over his purchase of the Caffe Torelli roastery - although many in the trade had known or suspected the purchase was on the way, and we ourselves had refrained from publishing it because we don't 'report' rumours, we then misunderstood a message from Nero and came out with the news... while Gerry was still bound to silence under a confidentiality clause. Nero were very gracious about it... and so on a similar occasion was Jim Corbett, the managing director of Bewley's, at the time when rumours were pinging around for a couple of years about his supposed purchase of the Darlington's company in London. One website reported as a fact that the deal had been done - we asked Jim, saying that we don't report rumours, which he appreciated, so much so that when the deal actually was done some months later, he gave us the exclusive on it.

And we can make our own mistakes perfectly well, thank you. We are unlike any other trade magazine, which is why we get into so much trouble. It's our sense of humour which causes most of our problems.

Typically, when the coffee-maker company Bunn confirmed that its new sales manager would be David Locker, previously with Marco Beverage Systems and before that Mantaya, we mischievously noted that Mantaya had now indirectly supplied Bunn's last two senior appointments... Roger Cobb had gone in the same direction. We playfully asked the company's then chief, John Cavey, whether he deserved commission for this remarkable achievement, and received a response which might be described as 'positively in the affirmative'. We also quoted Marco's top man Drewry Pearson as graciously commenting that he wished David well, adding mischievously: 'so long as it is at the expense of...', and we edited out the name of the competitor company he referred to.

The American management of Bunn were not at first entirely amused, because as has often been noted, a certain type of English humour does not always travel well across the Atlantic... however, the real lesson came from Bunn's lady in charge of European matters, Lina Chiodo, who is a student of 'cross-cultural' matters. That's the skill which has been referred to as 'kiss, bow, or shake hands?', the understanding of how to deal in business with people from different backgrounds, who do things differently, laugh at different jokes, and so on. Lina is Canadian-Italian, and speaks five languages, and knows what to laugh at, who to laugh with, and when to laugh first. Think that sounds odd? Just think how inept we British are at dealing with our clos-

est coffee partners, the Italians - I can count on three fingers the British coffee people I know who can speak Italian. I once said to someone who publishes a 'rival' magazine which he would like to be read by coffee-house owners (*miaow!*) that I was thinking of learning Italian in order to approach the subject more fully. He said 'what the hell do you want to do that for?', which speaks volumes.

While it's our humour which gets us into trouble virtually every week, we also make the occasional cock-up through genuine mistakes or misplaced enthusiasm. When La Spaziale introduced their absolute whizzbang espresso machine, the S5, I woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, convinced that I had published to a breathless waiting world that they had introduced the 'C5', which was of course the electric car invented by Sir Clive Sinclair, generally regarded as one of technology's great white elephants. La Spaziale would have killed me. Did I actually get it wrong, or was it just a dream? I'm not telling you.

We suffered one of the most embarrassing things ever to happen to a trade magazine when our printer lost concentration, and didn't notice that one of his coloured inks had run out. We actually have copies of one issue of our magazine in which James Sweeting of the roaster Lincoln and York is pictured wearing a white shirt with red stripes, against a cream wall... but several hundred copies later in the print run, other readers received a magazine in which he was wearing a shirt with green stripes against a red wall. We don't think James himself ever noticed.

However, in the same issue, that same printing fault affected an advertisement for Richard Jansz of Coffee Compass in Littlehampton, with the horrifying result that he appeared in a tasteful shade of vomit-pink, looking as if he had been made up for a vampire role in a horror film. This was a terrible slur, as he's really a very nice chap and a creative roaster (and indeed one of the first people to help create a coffee beer). Unfortunately, he certainly did notice, and we believe was teased mercilessly.

Exaggeration in PR claims, and mistakes by editors, are both different from made-up stories. Today, the word 'sensationalism' has now come to mean 'made up', which is nonsense. As one of the great newspaper editors of the 60s explained long ago, to 'sensationalise' merely means to dramatise a story, in order to present it in such a way as to make it easy to read, and easy for the reader to instantly grasp the necessary facts.

Having said that, some papers really do make things up. A brilliant book called *'Lies, Damned Lies, and Sun Exclusives'* traced a series of stories which had been run by the tabloids. In several cases, one paper had picked up on something reported by a rival, and embroidered it slightly to 'improve' it before running its own version... which was then picked up by the next paper, who 'improved' it a bit more, and so on. By the time three papers had done that, the story was well away from anything representing the truth!

And there was a case some years back in which a tabloid was accused of quoting a person, who said, as so often happens, that they had never spoken to the paper at all. When carpeted by the authorities, the tabloid editor actually answered: 'we couldn't reach them - so we printed what we knew they would have said.'

(The literally-unbelievable American paper, 'National Enquirer', has a history of

reporting the impossible – the original 'I had the baby of a Martian invader' and that kind of thing. At one time the editor was a Scot, with the ability to keep a deadpan stone face. When confronted with one impossible aliens-from-outer-space story, and the accusation 'that can't possibly be true!', he replied politely: 'my informant assures me it is true...!')

It is always satisfying to have a reader quote back at us, as hot news, something which we know they've read from our paper. That proves we're doing our job. But even we agree that it can be far more entertaining to have fiction quoted as fact.

It has happened to more famous writers than us - Donald Bain was a former airline executive turned novelist, who was behind the 'Murder, She Wrote' mystery series, but what was not so widely known was that he also wrote the notable 'Coffee, Tea, or Me?', the sexy diaries of two air hostesses. The phrase has entered the popular idiom, and it is said that it even inspired some flight attendants to take up the career!

Well, by far the greater part of it was made up, and nobody knew for a long time that it was made up and written by a man.

Once, when this revelation had just come out and was a hot topic, Mr Bain himself was on a plane, sitting next to a guy who asked the stewardess if she had read the book, and if she knew that it was actually written by a man.

"At this, of course, I'm all ears!" recalled Bain. "And the stewardess, who I had never seen before, said, 'As a matter of fact I met the guy who wrote it on a flight last week. He said I can be in the sequel! We're having dinner next week.' "

Sadly, trade-paper editors like me just don't have that kind of attraction.



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6. Does advertising work... on you?

The unsubtle messages of some of your suppliers

How does it feel to be a target? Because, dear cafe owner, you are - you're the major target in the sights of all those people who want you to use their espresso machine, or brew and sell their coffee, or stock their biscuits. You would like to think that these potential suppliers are on your side, and some of them certainly do believe in the theory of 'partnership' between trade supplier and trade customer - but to a lot of them, you're just a number on a target. Which means that you are the intended reader of their advertising.

Now, the point of a supplier's advertising is to get their potential customer (the cafe owner) interested in what they do, which is why it is so sad for the entire beverage trade that so many coffee suppliers are appallingly bad at it. This is a double worry for us, bearing in mind that our magazine's survival depends on those advertisements... but quite truthfully, if anyone wants to put in our magazine an advertisement which seems designed to achieve no interest at all, we do feel bound to tell them so.

And yet this is very useful. The general beverage trade, and certainly the high-street cafes, can learn a lot from the big boys' advertising, if only as a course on how not to promote yourself.

You'd be astonished how many companies still spend money on advertisements in a paper, or indeed spend thousands decorating a stand at an exhibition, with a slogan that says: 'Bloggs and Co - for all your coffee needs'. Well, many general suppliers handle 'all your needs' - so why say so?

But we do love imaginative and frontier-pushing advertising. The risk, of course, is that the closer an ad gets to the edge, the more likely you are to have a call from the Advertising Standards Authority, and you would be surprised how often this happens in the beverage trade.

The Aussie and New Zealand trades often get into trouble with the advertising police. There was a tirade of complaints when Fagg's Coffee had fun with its own name, on a poster campaign proclaiming: "Not as Ponsonby as the name suggests... the great straight coffee." Well, Ponsonby is apparently Auckland's gay neighbourhood, and the gay lobby rose in fury... but the country's advertising standards people dismissed their complaints.

Nearby in Australia, the advertising standards people were handed a complaint about McDonalds' coffee promotion, claiming it contained racist references.

Aboriginal activist Stephen Hagan lodged the complaint about a commercial using familiar Australian coffee terms such as 'long black' and 'short black'. The activist said he was surprised when the complaint was dismissed, and commented, with great restraint: "I believe the people from the Advertising Standards Bureau are a bunch of rednecks who probably wouldn't know a black fella if they fell over one."

In Britain and the rest of Europe, beverage-related advertising standards cases still continue to raise eyebrows. In the UK, the ASA upheld a decision against a TV advertisement for Tetley, in a ruling which baffled everyone. The commercial showed a woman at home preparing to go for a jog. When she saw it was raining she made a cup of tea instead. A voice-over said: "For an easy way to help look after yourself, pick up Tetley Green Tea. It's full of antioxidants". On-screen text stated "As part of a healthy diet and lifestyle".

Four viewers complained that the ad implied that Tetley green tea had the same or similar health benefits as exercise. Tetley replied that the ad clearly said 'part of a healthy lifestyle, not that green tea could replace exercise. Although the ASA appears to have accepted this, it still said that Tetley's evidence, in the form of medical research studies, was insufficient to substantiate a claim of general health benefits, and that the ad must be withdrawn.

More generously, the Advertising Standards authority cleared Twinings of 'playing on negative racial stereotypes'. A complainer said that the brand's TV commercial theme of 'puts the zing in your ding-a-ling' indicated that black men existed to provide sexual services for white women. Nobody quite understood that one.

(Copywriting can go close to the line. The owner of Bea's of Bloomsbury wrote a super recipe book based on the house cakes, and reports that for safety, she edited out one extremely descriptive phrase - it was, in preparing for macarons, 'now blitz the sugar and almonds until it's so fine you could snort it'.)

Meanwhile, an advertising-trade magazine reported that Nespresso was arguing with Lavazza over a campaign theme. Nespresso's European ad involves its star name, George Clooney, visiting heaven where he encounters God and enters into a conversation about coffee. Lavazza apparently complained that the theme was pinched from its own campaign, which featured coffee with angels and St. Peter. The matter was referred to the Italian equivalent of the ASA. Nespresso is reported to have made the delightful comment: "The after-life is not particularly linked to just one brand."

One of the oldest instant coffee brands of all, Camp Coffee, came in for complaints under 'political correctness', concerning a logo they have been using for, we think, around a hundred years. The drink, which is only four per cent coffee and 20 per cent chicory, was invented in 1876 as a quick-brew drink for troops serving abroad, and since very early on, its traditional label has shown a turbaned servant serving coffee to his western master - in the various label designs that have been used over the years, the servant stands a pace behind the kilted Scots officer, who is apparently based on a real character, Major-General Sir Hector 'Fighting Mac' Macdonald. It seems that Asian shopkeepers, particularly those of a Sikh background, recently refused to stock the product because of the 'over-deferential' attitude of the servant to the officer. The rather exasperated makers re-designed the label to show the two sitting side by side.

(To our surprise, the *Telegraph* recently reported that Camp liquid-chicory coffee is now 'chic'. We confess to being speechless!)

It's true that some coffee ads have been trailblazers – the TV ones with the Nescafe Gold Blend couple (Anthony Head and Sharon Maughan) were among the very first to use continuing characters in a kind of soap opera way. (Bizarrely, we are told, Sharon actually lost her sense of smell at one stage - it came back, quite suddenly, while doing another ad for an entirely different coffee company!)

On the other hand, some recent big-name TV ads have caused a furore, but only inside the trade, and for reasons the average consumer would probably not notice. The big-brand series which showed a less than sharp-witted gap-year student working at origin on a coffee farm came in for a bit of stick from the speciality coffee trade because the farm appears to be harvesting bags of brown, ready-roasted coffee.

It would be unfair to criticise Kenco alone, because back in the 80s, Nescafe's ads featured Gareth Hunt (of the *Avengers*), Diane Keen and Una Stubbs. This produced the infamous 'Nescafe handshake' in which Hunt would wave a closed fist, opening it to reveal a handful of roasted beans. In those days, nobody ever questioned how he managed to produce roasted beans from a jar of soluble granules – but then this was before the days of coffee geeks and artisan roasters. (The so-called 'Nescafe shake' gesture later became a quite infamous descriptive male term - but we certainly can't tell you why in a family magazine!)

"In general, coffee advertising on TV comes close to doing for coffee what chimps did for tea..." said one of our green coffee importers sourly.

He was of course referring to the old black-and-white PG Tips ads of the 1950s, based on the idea of a chimpanzees' tea party, which went on to become the longest-running series advertisement of its kind in the world. The 'actors' were real chimps, dressed as humans, in situations which invariably finished with them drinking a cup of tea. How did the producers get the chimps to act out the various stories? Well, they didn't – they dressed them up in whatever clothes had been decided on, let the chimps play with various props including cups and saucers, and spent all day filming them. Then they took the best shots, created a story from them, and did voice-overs to fit.

There are some ads and some slogans which are pure harmless fun. When the Puccino's chain was on the way up, establishing its character and image (before it slid the other way dramatically, to the tune of an £11 million loss, later undergoing a full rescue job), it began printing little messages in the recess of the saucer, where the cup base sits. When the drinker looked closely, they found a message saying: 'there's nothing to read here...' That habit continues to this day - a recent one says 'in the dishwasher, nobody can hear you scream'!

Puccino's also used the wonderful but still under-used advertising medium of sucrology. This is the practice of overprinting sugar sachets, and there are, believe it or not, thousands of collectors around the world. There is a certain small intrinsic value in it – we've seen a sachet with a picture of Elvis Presley which dated it from the 1950s, going for about four pounds. And we have heard tales of rare sachet sets changing hands for around £50.

Single Source are one of the main producers of printed sugar sachets in the UK, and they once told us that the key to collectability value is in producing sets with a theme or a story. The big coffee brands' sachets are really boring, a sucrologist told us, but Single Source once produced a set of NSPCC sachets to raise public awareness of their work; a police force had a collectable set about car crime; the French ski-slope operators have used them for reminders of safety messages, and the National Trust have also used sachets for promotions. These sets are all collectable, which we think makes it all the more astonishing that any supplier or café would go to the trouble of having their own sachets printed and simply put their logo on them - and nothing else. A bit more thought could elevate the promotional value immensely.

Prêt a Manger once told a very clever story on its napkins, about the 'cress-master' who selected a special strain for their sandwiches; they also said on a napkin that they invented the world's first barista council.

The same goes for takeaway cups - the biggest suppliers of takeaway cups all tell us they are astounded that cafes don't actually say something constructive on their paper cups. If you're going to have the things printed anyway, for heaven's sake do something that draws attention... have a competition, at least. What can be done with these things gets very interesting - International Paper recently devised a random-number print on the base of its cups. On the side of the cup was printed the first few cards in a poker hand - if the random number on the base completed a winning hand, the customer got a prize.

Some cup ideas backfire, spectacularly. Tim Hortons, the dominant Canadian coffee company, has long had a 'roll up the rim' contest. Its paper takeaway cups have a rim at the top, and printed under that rim is a code or message - it is, cup makers tell us, not too difficult a technology. One cup in several million carries a code that will win a car. In typical transatlantic litigation, one of the best court cases in recent years was when a consumer threw away their coffee cup; someone else picked it up, rolled back the rim, and won a car. The lawyers must have earned a fortune on the subsequent row over ownership, which lasted months.

However, you do have to be careful what you say in advertising, for several reasons.

What can you legitimately say and get away with it? At the Good Food Show once, a toaster company launched a machine, widely advertised on television, which 'turns instant coffee into authentic cappuccino'. Can that really be called cappuccino? And indeed 'authentic' cappuccino? We asked Louie Salvoni of Espresso Service, because we recalled that some years ago he was involved with a campaign which looked into the question of trading-standards terminology.

"Yes, we had a debate on definitions of coffee years ago, and at one point someone even suggested taking Nestle to court to highlight the subject - the argument was that you cannot pass off one drink as another, and espresso is a technique, brewed on the spot, a ritual in which the customer participates. Instant coffee is brewed, transported and reconstituted, rather the same as Cadbury's Smash.

"Therefore, 'cappuccino' made from instant coffee counts as 'passing off'."

The case did not ever get tested in a court.

Criticising competitors in advertising is a very risky trick. However, Costa and Starbucks, both of whom can be very clever in their posters and A-boards, do it quite regularly – it was generally thought extremely bold when Costa came out with a poster campaign directly claiming that the public preferred its coffee to Starbucks, who were taken by surprise and merely claimed that Costa's research was badly measured, before producing a quite low-key response of its own, along the rather mild lines of 'if you're coffee's not perfect, you're clearly not in Starbucks'.

But neither of them matched the sheer audacity of The Big J, a juice company which collated a set of statistics which compared the fruit juice content, sugar and/or sweetener content, and the colourings, flavourings, preservatives and stabilisers to be found in other juice drinks. Its ratings were by skulls and crossbones, and the alleged worst performer of the entire industry was one of Britain's biggest and longest-standing fruit-cordial names. We were amazed that they got away with it.

Using these tactics are not for the faint-hearted or the small corner company – it helps to have a gigantic legal department behind you!

You also have to be careful that people read your advertising correctly. In Atlanta, Georgia, the local Coca-Cola company tested a new coffee brand, using the pilot name of Viala Café (a few months before Starbucks used almost exactly the same name for its instant product). Forty-five per cent of locals in a survey said they had read the pilot name as 'Viagra'.

But, in coffee houses, a little well-judged mis-spelling can actually be helpful. A lot of café-owners have put in some enjoyable work trying to recreate famous chocolate bars as coffee drinks, and the manager of a Coffee Republic site once told us that any chocolate bar you can buy in a newsagent, he could replicate with coffee and flavoured syrups. A coconut syrup and chocolate will put you on the way to a Bounty taste, for example, and a combination of caramel and hot chocolate can make something close to a Mars bar. A café in Parramatta, New South Wales (called, oddly, the Mars Hill café) has created a drink based on the Snickers bar, which is espresso with chocolate, vanilla, caramel & hazelnut, topped with whipped cream. The recent trend for toffee-flavour syrups puts you on the road to a Toffee Crisp beverage (which indeed Coffee Republic did briefly offer).

The advertising problem with all these is that you can't actually put the original name on your specials board, or the brand will have you in court before you can wipe your steam arm. So the Bounty becomes a 'mutiny on the coffee' – and then they can't touch you for it!

However, you do have to be careful of your offers. The most generous discount offer ever advertised by a coffee house was in Glasgow, where the opening-day promo material read: 'opening offer - 100 per cent off our freshly-prepared food!'



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7. A nice cuppa tea

How English tax led to the American coffee invasion

Everyone in the modern coffee-house trade should be grateful to the tea industry. Because if it were not for tea, the Americans would not have started drinking coffee... and if they had not, our modern coffee bar boom would not have happened.

On 16th December, 1773, three shiploads of tea arrived in Boston during a big row over tax. The argument was not simply about whether tea should be taxable, but whether the parliament in London had a right to levy a tax in the colonies. To make their point, a group of men boarded the ships and, in three hours, dumped 342 chests of tea overboard. This was the Boston Tea Party.

The consequence has never been better, or more concisely, described than by the late Edward Bramah, founder of the sadly-closed tea and coffee museum in Southwark:

"The rent-a-crowd threw the tea overboard, curiously not having checked first to see that the tide was out. That protest started what led to the American War of Independence, which in turn led to the Americans drinking coffee for demonstrably patriotic reasons, because Britain of course had cut off tea imports. As a result, the Americans' taste for coffee grew, and so it was our own fault that we were eventually invaded by Starbucks."

(One of those tea chests recently turned up in Laredo, as a family heirloom which had been kept ever since those days).

Why is it that India and Ceylon are our big tea suppliers? Because of a chap called Robert Fortune, who was given official funds to illegally smuggle tea plants out of China, to British-ruled India. He went into areas in which foreigners were not allowed to travel, by dressing as a Chinese, and stole tea plants. He landed in Calcutta, where his tea bushes were carried on elephants to what became the Assam planting grounds. Only a handful of the plants actually survived, but their descendants became one of the great teas.

This in turn led to the British equivalent of the gold rush, in which thousands of our young men left for India to make their fortunes in the tea farms. That was incredible bravery, when you consider that they looked at sheer jungle and saw instead a vision of potential tea gardens. A third of them died from malaria and yellow fever. But it brought about a remarkable shift of power – up to 1850, every drop of our tea came from China, and by 1939, it had all been replaced by tea from India, Ceylon, and a little from Africa. That in turn was the beginning of variety, because while the Chinese had spent centuries working on uniformity of taste, the vast number of Indian tea gardens were suddenly producing all kinds of different tastes, which the British began to develop into blends. (Curiously, the classic English Breakfast tea is not English at all.

It was actually invented in Scotland by someone who is believed to have been one of the founders of Brodies, the coffee-roasters and tea-blenders of Edinburgh.)

To this day, the owners of the Indian tea gardens put up with some unique hazards. Very recently, one estate was invaded by monkeys, who scared workers and damaged machinery, and even invaded the crèche and snatched food from the hands of the children. But the management dared not drive them out, because it would have started a riot if they offended the large number of their workers who revere the Hindu monkey-god, Hanuman.

So the cartoon image of the Victorian explorer hacking his way through the undergrowth of foreign parts, looking for plant specimens to bring back home to the gardens of the empire on which the sun never set, is fairly accurate. And one result of this is the first commercial tea plantation in Britain, which is Tregothnan in Cornwall, where our friend Jonathan Jones is the head gardener. In Victorian times, tea plants were brought back to the estate by the titled family which owns it, and now Jonathan has developed those plants into a full estate. Tregothnan tea is not cheap, even to the trade, but it is very good, and to have English-grown tea on your menu is a terrific selling-point.

However, we Brits have also become the world's biggest users of the tea-bag, a development which arouses some traditionalists to fury, and the story of which was again best told to us in Bramah's unique style:

"In 1952, the year the Moka coffee bar opened in Soho, every other country in Europe drank more coffee than we did. We drank 99 per cent tea, which made the coffee brands wonder how to turn us to their product – should they make it liquid, like Camp coffee, or make it in digestible tablets, or try and inject babies at birth?

"And then commercial TV started, and it was realised that the time left for the advertisements left too little time for tea. The habit of leaving it to brew for five minutes was at the heart and soul of British tea-drinking, and yet the television people had decided on commercial breaks of only two minutes!

"So the soluble-coffee people advertised their product night after night, and the public were brainwashed into instant coffee. The tea industry didn't know what had hit them, and the tea trade was decimated.

"But meanwhile, it had occurred to tea planters that they could save a lot of time in manual processing, by putting the tea leaf through a mangle of serrated steel which crushed it in a second. They had created CTC, the 'cut, tear and curl' tea. Suddenly we had a different product, one which was a dark colour in the cup, and which made a brew at a speed which could compete with instant coffee. The tea companies were so impressed by it that they recruited chimpanzees to make television commercials to show us how to drink tea... and thirty years later, 95 per cent of the UK market is in tea-bags."

We British are not the most imaginative users of tea-bags. They were banned from a prison in Canada, after it was discovered that inmates had ingeniously discovered a way of turning them into cigarettes, in a prison where tobacco was not allowed. The method involved nicotine chewing gum, of the kind which are supposed to be used to

wean you off smoking, and which were thus approved of by the prison authorities. These were boiled to give a nicotine residue that was then sprinkled on the tea-leaves, which were then rolled in cigarette paper. Each cigarette took two days to make – but in a no-smoking prison, they were like gold-dust.

By far the best tea-bag story of recent times involved Kim Cattrall, the star of *Sex and the City*, who was hired for a TV advertisement campaign for Tetley. One of the many brilliant bits of dialogue in her American television series had involved a reference to 'teabagging', which is an intimate social activity we dare not describe in our paper, but you can work it out from the script – one of the girls, at a café table, is referring to untidiness and litter on the table when she says 'we have a tea-bag situation', to which Kim instantly replies: 'just breathe through your nose'. Surely, it was no coincidence that Tetley chose that actress?

Was it coincidence that at exactly the same time, the Waitrose supermarket group also came up with a silly-season story about which biscuits are best for dunking?

And that the answer was ginger nuts?



The most profitable tea of all is afternoon tea, which is traditionally tea, delicate sandwiches, delicate pastries, and scones with jam and cream. Whether you put the cream on before the jam or the other way round depends on whether you're from Devon or Cornwall... about which, we were able to tease Peacocks, the award-winning tea room in Cambridgeshire, that they had dared to serve a 'Devonshire cream tea' with Cornish clotted cream. That would be a hanging offence in the west country, where *Coffee House* magazine is written.

Is afternoon tea worth the effort? A survey of tea-rooms showed that demand for afternoon tea has increased by up to eighty per cent, and what is breathtaking is the way the big London boys do it... and indeed, what they charge. The Ritz is between £37 and £48, depending on whether you have the champagne; Grosvenor House is £28-£35, and Brown's (the top London tea place in 2009) is £37-£50. At the Lanesborough Hotel on Hyde Park Corner (£35-£80) their tea sommelier Karl Kessab once entertained us to afternoon tea and recounted tales of competition with the other top hotels... believe it or not, they send out spies.

"We regularly send our staff to dine and take tea elsewhere, and to watch – what are they doing, what do they charge, what's the service like? You see some interesting things, such as one place which served its butter served on a little marble plate. Brilliant! But I also saw one very famous place, that charges more than us, using teabags..."

Just down the road from Karl, Michael Farquhar at the Four Seasons also gave us an afternoon tea. He was one of the first we knew to run a paid-for training course for consumers, on how to prepare afternoon tea – now, many of the top hotels do it, and I think it's £150 or so at Claridges.

A wonderful new extension of the concept of afternoon tea has recently been devised,

based on the private supper club or 'underground restaurant' concept, not that we ever get invited to such things. It was devised by 'Lady Grey', who we suspect is an American cookery writer, at the Hidden Tea Room in central London... which is her own flat. On certain weekend dates through the year, just six 'guests' are entertained. Bookings are fairly tight, several months in advance, at a cost of (we think) £25 a head, and the hostess's own well-regarded cupcakes can be bought as takeaways, a couple of quid a time. Lady Grey declined to tell us her tea and coffee sources, but we thought it would be only a matter of time before the idea was copied, and indeed it has now developed into dinner parties.

However, the marketing of tea should quite decidedly not be aimed simply at the older generation. Bill Gorman of the Tea Council has always told us to watch the growth of sales to young women: "This is because it is seen to be healthy with regard to calories and caffeine, and it fits into their world of cosmetics, fashions and health. They want the perfect body, can't be bothered to go to the gym, still want to get drunk on a Friday, but see tea as being a fine thing to drink.

"There is also an interesting move towards afternoon tea as the venue and focus for business meetings. It has been realised that the business lunch, with alcohol flowing, changes the nature of a meeting - with alcohol, everyone can end up at a different place, whereas with tea, everybody starts and finishes in a more rational state of mind."

Not if you drink jasmine tea, according to the Mexican legal system - a court there set free a prisoner who said he committed a crime after drinking ten cups of jasmine tea, and successfully claimed it had turned out to be hallucinogenic. Try that on the Red Hat Society!

Whatever you do with tea, you have to make it properly. Tea, as we have so often pointed out, is the one subject in a café which is rarely taught to staff, for the ludicrous reason that it is assumed, dangerously, that everyone knows how to make tea. Of course, everybody does not. We were staying in a pub in Lancashire, and were served two refills of hot water... both cold. Shortly afterwards we were back home in Falmouth, Cornwall, at a hotel for dinner, and the tea was served with a little jug of - wait for it - hot milk. Why?

One of the major hazards with tea is of café staff using a kettle filled with water left over from a previous boiling. "Fresh cold water contains the most dissolved oxygen, which is what brings the flavour of tea out," we were told by Stephen Twining, of the family brand. "Boiled water has lost some of its oxygen. If you boil water twice, you will have even less oxygen, and your tea will be flat and boring."

And, astonishing as it may sound, a council in Hertfordshire actually spent £200 on a health and safety consultant to teach staff how to make a cup of tea. According to the council, their tea-lady was made redundant, and in the following weeks, several staff injured themselves while trying to make their own. Good grief...

Rare teas can cost a fortune. When Posh Spice said that she only drank pu-erh tea, for her skin, interest rocketed in what had up to then been a very unusual Chinese tea. It is quite true that any decent tea-room can do well out of 'flower tea', in which buds

have been hand-tied to the tea... brew in a clear glass teapot, and the flowers blossom in front of the customer. Present it well, and you can name your own price.

There is one kind of tea which, according to the promotion, is only picked by trained ladies at a certain time of day. This seems fair enough, but when you read the rest of the promotional material, which says they do so with gold scissors, you do begin to wonder.

And does monkey tea really exist?

Giles Hilton, as tea taster for Whittards, once told us of Ti Kuan Ying China Oolong, or 'monkey-picked' tea. These leaves come from wild tea bushes, which have developed naturally in remote, fairly inaccessible mountainous places. It is said that in the old days this tea was picked by trained monkeys... one legend says that a pet monkey watched his master picking the leaves, and copied him. Anyway, this rare tea is now picked by humans, but only on a couple of days a year.

Paulo Crocetta of the excellent Algerian Coffee Store in Soho once got hold of some Ma Nau Mi Ti Kuan Yin, or 'Chinese Monkey-picked tea', which he offered at £9.95 for 57gm (yes, that's right!)

"Legend has it that monkeys were first trained to pick tea ten centuries ago", he told us seriously. "Only one small village continues to practice this remarkable tradition."

Fascinated, we asked where Paulo had learned about this great Chinese practice, and he replied, with a delightfully straight face - "from the packet".



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8. Baristas as Rockstars

The demi-gods behind the espresso machines

It was the senior member of the Olmi family, head of Drury Coffee, who once predicted that manufacturers will soon produce a fully-automatic coffee machine which features just one button in the top of the front panel, coloured in red and white circles like a target. The average Saturday part-time barista could just head-butt it to turn out a coffee.

Very few things in the coffee trade arouse such passions as the role of 'barista', and what it entails. Everybody who has ambitions to serve decent coffee to the public is going to need a barista, because this is the person who works the espresso machine – but Lord, what a range of skills and characters that word embraces!

It is reckoned that there are 60,000 or more people in the UK who make espresso coffee as the major part of their job; the true figure is impossible to calculate, because it depends on how you classify the work, but it could be as high as 500,000. There are (it is said) 50,000 hotels in the UK, 56,000 restaurants, and a steadily-falling figure of pubs which may now be down below 50,000. The total of cafes and coffee-houses is impossible to count; the suggested 11,000 coffee-houses with espresso machines sounds reasonable, but nobody really knows.

Certainly, if there really are 150,000 commercial-sized espresso machines working in Britain, as is often suggested, then allowing for shift work, the total number of baristas could reach half a million.

Whatever the number, it encompasses a wonderful range of skills. We briefly worked on a magazine in Ilfracombe, and were always loyal to one café – the lady in charge was not the most delicate milk-frother in the trade, and it was impossible to tell her latte from her cappuccino, but she attacked the frothing with such enthusiasm and enjoyment, not least with an action that resembled milking a cow, that I didn't really care. I just liked seeing her having fun doing her job.

On the other hand, of course, are the quite excellent baristas... of whom we probably have several hundred in the UK.

Curiously, many of these best baristas are not that well-known. The kind of people who join trade associations, and those who seem to spend their entire days on Twitter, say 'everybody knows the best baristas', but the fact is that everybody doesn't, and there are two reasons for that – first, the coffee trade has very little coverage in the mass media, and second, there is very little communication inside the trade. You've got *Coffee House* magazine, and precious little else. So the fact is that of, shall we say, ten thousand independent coffee-houses and tea-rooms in the UK, many thousands of everyday café staff and managers probably haven't a clue that top baristas exist, or that barista championships exist, or indeed that the UK had the world champions in 2007 and 2009.

Whoever you reckon the top baristas are, they have something in common. Notably, an absolute and unshakeable belief in their own opinions! Fortunately, most of the top British baristas have more modesty and humility than the so-called 'rockstar baristas' in some parts of the world.

The AustralAsian Speciality Coffee Association once promoted an accreditation scheme for baristas, and with remarkable candour, the chairman agreed that the first things his country's baristas could learn would be humility. Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he described baristas as 'self-appointed people with certificates who think they know everything', and said that many baristas declined invitations to enter competitions and championships, because they believed they were too good.

In support, an author of a book on restaurant training agreed that 'rockstar baristas' on the equivalent of about £500 a week expect to be 'treated like gods' by other staff, and had forgotten about service, becoming instead critical and scathing of customers. This was illustrated in the case of the American customer whose request for a triple espresso over ice was rejected by a Seattle barista as 'not being correct'. The consumer recorded his anger on the internet, and his complaint received 100,000 visitors. The barista's employer was not displeased, because visitors to his café website suddenly shot up from a trickle to 15,000 a day. But it's worth the purists in the espresso trade noting that when the *Washington Post* ran a poll asking whether a barista was justified to refuse serving a drink he thought 'not right', eight hundred readers replied: 'who cares?'

In the UK, the recent trend is for filter coffee 'brew bars' (that is, a menu of different high-grade filter coffees, each brewed one cup at a time, using the method and recipe considered to be best for each coffee). Several of the baristas operating these have adopted also the regime of having neither milk nor sugar on the premises, ruling that the customer will drink the coffee as pure as is possible. To their credit, Starbucks baristas will serve a filter coffee and ask if you want it up to the brim, or whether you want space left for milk, and will make no comment on your choice... if the customer wants a delicate Yirgacheffe with milk and two sugars, then that's their problem.

Correctness in drinks does lead to strong views in many places.

Even in a trade noted for strong opinions, a book written by Ben Harnwell and Luciano Franchi (of Caffè Vergnano in London) stands out for its strictness. This book laid down such opinions as an Italian-made espresso machine being the only acceptable choice, that single-origin coffees are a fashion-driven fad that cannot compare to a finely-blended espresso, that the temperature at which cappuccino is served by two of our major chains is 'an offence to any civilised society', and that adding sugar to a cappuccino is the act of a madman.

"One day", they told us, "we would like to say to a customer – no, we're a coffee shop, we don't sell latte". I couldn't resist rising to it. Surely the latte is a legitimate drink, and a café owner should not try to dictate what customers like?

"It is not a legitimate drink," Luciano replied firmly. "If you ask for latte, you are asking for a glass of milk... and a latte macchiato, which is a milk with coffee added, is a drink for grandmothers!"

(The 'latte' is in fact a drink created for the taste of the transatlantics, and although we have heard it called 'a modern American classic', the name actually comes from an anti-US insult. Legend has it that GIs serving in Italy couldn't handle the short coffee, and a grizzled old Italian bar owner got so irritated with them that every time they asked for milk, he wouldn't even look up, but just growled the instruction 'latte!' at his assistant. It turned into a drink of its own.)

So, how precise and picky should the serious high-street barista be? Like it or not, sufficiently so to be willing to throw the day's first coffees away, as the espresso machine gets warmed up and into its stride.

Our old friend Gino d'Acampo, who we first met when he was promoting pasta before he became a TV celebrity chef (and indeed a jungle champion in *I'm a Celebrity...*) once told us: "any Italian mother will tell you to first make one coffee to throw away, and then you can make one for your friends", and a famous Neapolitan café owner always said that his first 25 espressos were on the house, because those were the ones he would be throwing away anyway.

Thomas Polti, who was one of the UK's early barista champions and who now runs a gastro-pub in Bedfordshire, tells us that he was taught the same when at the age of eight, he was set to making coffee for the old folks around Lake Como. If he didn't get it right, the shout would be: 'hey, what's this? Get his mother!'

In Britain, of course, the average consumer may not be so choosy. We are indebted to Max Colonna-Dashwood of the Colonna and Smalls coffee house in Bath for this insight into the perennial problem of good coffee in pubs.

Bath, of course, is one of the modern notable centres of good coffee, and a chap who recently set up a coffee shop in the city was formerly running a pub, so he put an espresso machine on the bar as a training opportunity, intending to practice serving great coffee as experience before opening his own cafe. His defining experience, says Max, was a very angry customer who accused him of experimenting on her with 'weird and wacky' coffees. "When I go to a pub and order a coffee," she said, "I want a coffee that tastes like coffee".

And that neatly encapsulates the speciality trade's major problem!



But can you get too serious? The National Institute for Italian Espresso dictated the 'world standard' for cappuccino. This said that a cappuccino must consist of 125ml milk (4.39 fluid ounces), no warmer than 3-5C (42 F), contain a minimum of 3.2 per cent protein and 3.5 per cent fat, and one 25ml (0.8 fl oz) shot of hot espresso coffee. The approved brewing instructions are to add coffee to a 150-160ml (5.6 oz) capacity ceramic cup, froth milk with steam to a temperature of 55C (131 F), and add it to the coffee in the cup.

We were delighted that it was an Italian company, Lavazza, which produced the catty response that if we have to follow the Italian rules that strictly, then in accordance with Italian social practice, a drink served after 11.00am cannot be certified as cappuccino,

and any customer ordering it should be thrown out.

(An equal crime should be the practice of chocolate on top of a cappuccino. The name of the guy who first did this escapes us, but he certainly wasn't an Italian – he was British, and he did it in one of the Soho coffee bars of the 1950s. And it is entirely his fault that the 'meringue' tops of so many cappas served in British cafes these days look so unappealing.)

The practical truth is that anyone who wants to be a successful British barista really has to tread a path between sticking to what is 'right', and bending the rules to allow what the customer wants.

Paul Meikle-Janney of Coffee Community in Yorkshire, one of the few people in Britain to be universally acknowledged as an authority on barista training, told us that it is not always good for baristas to be told 'this is the only way to make espresso'.

"Questioning and adapting the rules is an exceptionally useful skill," he pointed out. "If you're knocking out cappuccinos for a queue of customers and a coachload arrives, you're going to need to know the techniques which allow you to cope with unforeseen situations, and which shortcuts are acceptable."

(And when you learn them, he added in a delightfully accurate aside, you're going to know a lot more about coffee than half the people who are trying to sell you beans!)

There are some practices which many baristas think normal, and others deride, such as re-setting the grinder. Jeremy Torz of Union Hand-Roasted tells us that he used to work in San Francisco, and whenever the mist rolled in across the bay, he knew that the change in humidity would play merry hell with the beans in the hopper, and that he would have to work hard to re-set the grinder for a decent espresso extraction. Many baristas in different parts of the UK say that their own local weather variations give the same problem.

And yet, there are coffee salesmen who take it upon themselves to set a café-owner's grinder and actually say: 'don't touch that until I come back again, next month!' David Wiggins of Cappuccino Rapido told us extremely happily that he has won several new accounts over this: "these new customers came to us after using a celebrated branded roast – they told us that after the statutory monthly visit from the brand's roving ambassador, it always took them a couple of days to undo his adjustments and restore the house style. People dislike being dictated to, I find."

The good barista understands that the grinder dictates the extraction of the espresso. It was Torz again who commented to us: "One end of the catering industry sees automatic machines as a godsend to staffing problems, and asks if they can get one which will turn an espresso out in five seconds... well, they can, but nature works at nature's speed, and coffee and water take time to work together, which is why an extraction is around 20-25 seconds. You can have a five-second espresso if you want, if you're happy to serve dishwater."

(A friend of ours in the trade was at an airport once, and went for an espresso. Out of habit, he did what many of us do, and quietly timed the extraction, which was about fifteen seconds. He said to the barista, severely: 'that was a bit quick'. The barista replied proudly: 'if you're really pushed, I can do it in eleven seconds!')

The good news is that more decent baristas really are appearing every day. Several companies have noted a realization among jobhunters that the barista role now offers the chance of a worthwhile career, or at least a skilled and satisfying job in a relatively sociable environment. Angus McKenzie of Kimbo Coffee took the opportunity of the Bath Coffee Festival to try an experiment in plucking half a dozen unemployed local kids off the street, and putting them through the City and Guilds course under trainer Jon Skinner. Certainly, the trainer had to exert a little discipline, even sending one of them out of the room for texting, but suddenly the trainees were taking an interest in the subject, and local hotels and restaurants offered to give them interviews for possible jobs after their training was over.

And baristas are coming from other parts of the hospitality trade. Gerry Ford, the boss of Caffe Nero, told us he has recruited some of his best staff from pubs: "the standard of applicant is rising, and we notice how many come from the pub trade – these are people who like the hospitality trade, but abhor the kind of people who go to pubs, are tired of drunks, and tired of being punched and spat on. It is seen as more acceptable to work in a coffee-house than it was before, certainly a more acceptable job than McDonalds, and so we've picked up a few dozen good people this way!"

And some baristas come into the trade from very unexpected routes. Colonel Grumpy's Coffee Bus is staffed by a former very senior military man, who has had to undergo rather more training than most new starters – because, he once pointed out to us, "you have to remember that in the British army, colonels do not expect to make our own coffee..."

And there really is very little need to worry that you might employ a rockstar barista, a temperamental genius who will terrorise the rest of your staff. Many of today's top baristas are doing a very good role-model job of showing that you can work with great skill while still having a vast amount of modesty attached. You need only look at Gwilym Davies, the market-stall barista who won the world title for the UK in 2009, to see how he sailed through the whole paraphernalia of the world-champ circus without losing the likeable 'educated barrow-boy in a flat cap' character which made him popular.

And it is James Hoffmann, the UK's first world barista champ in 2007, who has most entertainingly campaigned against the idea of the rockstar barista. James once told us that in his very early days, he did briefly see coffee as a generic base product, which needed his skill to turn it into a great drink for the customer. It was later, he added with admirable humility, that he came to appreciate the subtleties of coffee variety and origin, and turned to a different understanding of his job as a barista... to do justice to what the farmer had toiled to produce.

"We are living in the best possible time for coffee, but we have also generated a lot of agony with the 'hipster' idiocy," James told a get-together of roasters and baristas. "Every time I hear the phrase 'educating the customer', I die a little inside - this attitude oozes out of our business as being smug, arrogant, patronising, and off-putting.

"We get too involved in 'being coffee people', We put a counter between us and the customer and we become different - we are smarter and more evolved humans than you, the public. This is a bad thing, and it is a very dangerous attitude!"

Between the head-butt and the rockstar, we're lucky to have such a lot of promising baristas out there for hire these days. And yet, as the owner of Bea's of Bloomsbury reported, a chef has quite reasonably complained that the recent spate of celebrity-cooking programmes has perhaps given too glamorous an impression, and the same might go for barista work.

The problem, he said, is that "television idealises manual labour like ours."

Perhaps we are indeed in danger of getting just too serious about it. For those of us who get over-excited about being in a cool, up-and-coming industry, here's a timely reminder from the *Washington Post*. One of their writers wrote recently: "In the 1990s, I worked for a glossy, beautifully designed magazine all about what was then the red-hot beverage trend: gourmet coffee, and 'the coffee and tea lifestyle'. It's easy to laugh about it now, but back in those heady days, coffee was sexy. By 1998, the red-hot lust for gourmet coffee information had cooled considerably. The sort of people who breathe life into lifestyle trends had begun to get bored and look elsewhere for whatever it is that drives lifestyle trends."

Back in those days? 1998? Oh, dear...



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9. Baking beans...

The wonderful world of roasters

If you are working in the coffee trade, sooner or later you are going to come into contact with a roaster. Once upon a time, we thought baristas were the most opinionated people we had ever met. Then we met the roasters...

Roasters are the alchemists of the coffee trade. They take a base material, in this case a green bean, and turn it into something which can be worth a small fortune. The smaller roasting companies can be 'artisans', which is a fashionable word for people who get their own hands dirty, and will 'craft-roast' in machines which take maybe five or ten kilos of coffee at a time, watching the beans as they gently change colour, and judging exactly the right moment to remove them from the heat.

At the other end of the scale are the 'industrial' roasters, who roast coffee in vast chambers the size of railway carriages. These people are often derided for their mass roasting, but I did once come on the receiving end of a clever argument from Martin Lines, an imaginative marketing director for Nescafe, as to why roasting in quantity required more precision than doing so by hand. If we get it wrong, he said, we waste tonnes, not a few kilos.

In the middle, we get a curious balance, the 'big names' with an enthusiasm which often seems more suited to small companies - such people as Masteroast, the UK's leading provider of own-label coffee, which roasts in relatively small batches, but has a library of, if I recall rightly, two thousand blend recipes. And Bollings in Yorkshire, where Ian Balmforth will happily argue the merits of computer-precision in roasting, against simply relying on the eyes and nose (and indeed the ears) of a human alone... with some justification, seeing that his Grumpy Mule collection of speciality coffees was taken up by some very ritzy retail names.

"We often have to explain that we use a traditional drum roaster which is computer-controlled for consistency, which is nothing to do with the big fast-drum method used by giant instant-coffee makers," he told us. "I think a really excellent taster can taste the difference between the 'by hand' and the 'computer controlled' roast, but it doesn't mean either is better - it means that 'by hand' isn't as consistent when you're doing five tones a day, because your senses would be physically exhausted."

You come across work such as that done by Lincoln and York, whose director James Sweeting tested biodegradable coffee packaging by planting it outside his office window and digging it up regularly - sounded perfectly sensible to us. (Eric Duncan of the James Aimer roastery in Dundee once provided small quantities of coffee in very lovely little jute sacks... he found a convenient source of sack-making labour at the local prison!)

Certain mid-sized coffee roasters are gloriously opinionated - but with good reason.

Jeremy Torz and Steven Macatonia of Union Roasters in London were among the very first people to get the Rwandan coffee industry back working after the infamous genocide that tore the country apart... even today, the reason that so many coffee farmers there are women is because they are war widows. Jeremy himself is a master of the art of verbal description of coffee: 'intense almond and fruited aroma, fragrant with winey floral notes, the shot gives an overlaying of marzipan, plum with a cocoa finish and lingering creamy body'. He once delivered a typical address at a reception for Rwandan coffee in the houses of Parliament, and told the audience about the 'deep notes of chocolate' to be experienced in the coffee. Every speaker after him, from trade leaders to the politicians Clare Short (tireless worker for international development) and Oona King ("I campaigned for election on a platform of good coffee...") managed to work the phrase 'deep notes of chocolate' into their presentations... we don't know if Jeremy noticed!

Jeremy and Steven produced what I have always found to be the most creative bit of work from coffee roasters - they worked with a guy called Richard Paterson, the chief taster of Whyte and Mackay, on the matching of great coffees with great whisky. Paterson is a legend in whisky - malt drinkers will actually get him to autograph their tasting notes. A tasting session I had with them remains a highlight in a coffee-writer's career... not that I can remember a thing about it, of course.

Equally opinionated about the lot of coffee farmers is David McKernan, the quite volatile head of Java Republic roasters, in Dublin. Now, we are as fond of David as we are of Steven and Jeremy, but you stand well back when the Irishman gets on his platform about the treatment of coffee farmers (and that is nothing compared to his denunciation of slavery in the cocoa trade).

In 2005, David visited Ethiopian farmers and came back furious, and ashamed, of what he had seen: 'humanity ignores them, bleeds them for their unique coffee, and treats them all like dogs', he raged. He reckoned he could create an Ethiopian blend, raise money, and generally do some good - but the following year, he went back to the country and was horrified to find six hundred coffee farmers whose families had no fresh water at all, just some stagnant brown muck that came from a watering-hole six hours' walk away.

This time, McKernan could not be stopped. He couldn't create an Ethiopian blend (the country's coffees are great individually, but don't work together well) but he came very close by using some Harar and Sidamo, with a bit of Brazilian and some Indonesian - by 2008 it was winning awards and eventually, with money raised from the coffee and other fund-raising, fresh water was struck in the area he visited.

McKernan took the same attitude with chocolate. He was appalled by stories of the living conditions of cocoa workers: "This is horrendous hard work. It's appalling. There is a huge amount of physical work involved - the pods have to be cut down from huge heights, and while sometimes they use a long stick with a machete on the end, sometimes they have to climb.

"The beans don't just fall out of the pod - it's very hard to get them out, and that's physical work as well. Very hard, for very little reward."

He went further:

"The industry has been up to its neck in child labour. All the producing countries say they're against it, but it is certainly still a huge factor. This is kids working in slave conditions, and that's a fact. They say in some countries it doesn't happen, and I don't believe them - the chocolate world is worse than the coffee one."

No sooner had McKernan got through that than Haiti was struck by its earthquake, and he bought a large quantity of the island's coffee as a gesture of support... and named it, of all things, after the island's premier faith.

Voodoo.



The great thing about roasters is that the British hospitality trade is very well served by them - a few years back, Steve Hurst and his green-bean importing team at Mercanta totted up on their fingers how many roasters they knew in Britain, and were astonished when they got past a hundred.

What this means for a coffee-house operator is - you don't have to get stuck with any one roaster. You can always change, or bring in 'guest coffees' from elsewhere. In the café trade in Italy, café owners enter into contracts with roasters, by which they get a free espresso machine to use, so long as they stick with the same coffee supplier... here, we still have freedom to switch between roasters. It might be said that anything which keeps suppliers worried is good.

(To be fair, the trend for cool coffee shops to promote great coffees from three or four top roasters can present a problem. Some roasters are now required to supply quite small amounts of coffee, very regularly, to an increasing number of coffee shops, which does present them with an expensive logistics problem).

"There is nothing to tie a British café owner to their roaster," says Ralph Lutton, the gentlemanly head of Brodie's roastery just outside Edinburgh. "This is what keeps us on our toes." He agreed with us when we told him something the chairman of the Institute of Purchasing and Supply once said to us - that he was staggered at the large number of professional buyers who place very big orders for product or equipment without going to see the premises on which it is produced. In coffee terms, how many coffee-house owners, or even restaurateurs, make a site visit to establish whether the potential supplier is roasting in his garage? How often do coffee-house owners talk to their roasters? The answer used to be 'very rarely', but now it's increasing. So, don't just listen to the waffle your coffee salesman feeds you - go and find a local roaster, and ask to sit in and watch. They'll never turn you down.

And this will sort your suppliers out for you.

One danger about buying from coffee suppliers is that they will often suggest, without actually saying so, that they are roasters - and they aren't. They're just distributors who buy from roasters and put their own badge on the coffee. This drives many real roasting companies to something approaching fury.

"You either roast coffee, or you don't," Roy Grey of Capital Coffee Roasters in London told us very recently. "But there are many companies passing themselves off

to the café trade as roasters, when they aren't. There are also coffee price lists which are complete lies - I have had people try to sell me sacks with labels that say 'Colombia', when the coffee inside them certainly isn't."

This is not new - many origin coffees have been the subject of counterfeiting, from Monsooned Malabars, which are 'treated' by the sea winds of western India, to the most expensive coffee in the world, Jamaica Blue Mountain. Jamaica just hasn't the capacity to produce all the supposed Blue Mountain which is on sale, so for heaven's sake check your supplier's bona fides before buying any!

And it doesn't help that so many coffee companies still trot out the tired old phrase, 'we use only the finest coffee beans...' As Richard Jansz of Coffee Compass in Littlehampton once enquired, with some justification: "if everyone's using only the finest beans, who's roasting all the rubbish which is around?"

Nor does it help that coffee salesmen know so little about the product. Indeed, it is trade legend that many coffee salesmen don't know anything about coffee at all... quiz them about origins, and wait for the hasty change of subject.

Colin Smith of Smith's in High Wycombe said exactly the same thing: "I recently had a coffee-shop customer complain that he had three reps coming in every week, all telling him that their coffee is the best. He asked me 'if all they can say is that theirs is the best, how am I expected to tell the difference?' It's a very good question!"

However, the great fact that so many of these roasters are so blooming opinionated does mean that for the coffee-shop owner, there is a vast amount of information available just for the asking - and even one conversation with a decent roaster will open up a pile of possibilities, believe us.

Several roasters started out as being coffee suppliers or coffee-house owners.

Tom Sobey of Origin in Cornwall, just a few miles from where we write our magazine, is a coffee supplier who has turned to roasting, and now has trade customers right round the UK. Due to a cock-up in the daily press, the *Telegraph* once called him 'first and only coffee roaster in Britain', which must have really impressed every other roaster in the country.

Steve Leighton of Has Bean in Stafford is another who counts as a 'small' roaster, though he has an immense reputation among those who know his coffee. "I didn't mean to be a roaster at first. I wanted to be a seller of good coffee beans, but our town wasn't ready for us - then we opened a quaint coffee shop, and found that Stafford wasn't ready for espresso, either! So we began roasting, and started with a little Alpenrost, roasting its guts out in the coffee-shop. This was cute - we had smoke everywhere, and we were doing four kilos a day until it blew up."

Today, his roasts are used by barista champions, but Steve refuses to go down the posey route of coffee-speak, and describing his coffees in pseudos-corner terms, as so many do.

"There's too much pomp in the coffee trade, and too much 'essence of hollyhock' puts people off," he told us. "As I get a lot of first-time customers, I want my descriptions to be basic. If I said 'floral tones', they wouldn't like it, because it scares them... but if I say 'it's like a Kenyan', they understand."

Steve was interviewed on Radio 4 about some coffee matter, and came out with the wonderful phrase: "I think of the high-street chains as the primary schools of coffee!"

It was that attitude which was behind what is almost certainly the most imaginative talking-shop project to appear in the trade. You would expect the best trade 'conferences' to be held by the establishment - but they're not. The best ones have been put together by a couple of creative revolutionaries, roaster Steve Leighton and barista champ Colin Harmon of Dublin.

This was Tamper Tantrums, a street-level get-together of roasters and baristas, with half a dozen speakers giving presentations on practical trade subjects ranging from customer service in a coffee shop to the matter of the totally-dissolved solids in filter coffee (it has to be said that your average tee-shirted barista in a top coffee shop knows a sight more about the practical chemistry of this beverage than anyone who tries to sell you beans) and even a presentation on gender equality in the trade and the appreciation of good female baristas. This last was delivered by a well-known barista champ in dress, handbag and pearls... but, rather disturbingly, still wearing his usual beard.

The live show was produced in front of a hundred or so, but was later made available online on video, and Leighton himself told us that this addressed a subject dear to our hearts on our magazine - the question of the trade 'community', and how much everyone in the coffee shop world can be included.

"The original Tantrums were on video, and came from the idea of a couple of mates talking about coffee. We now get five or six thousand downloads for each episode, and you know it's a global community when you get an email from a farmer saying that he has just watched me, online, doing a presentation about his own coffee.

"So nobody in a coffee shop in the middle of nowhere can now complain that they're not involved with the rest of the trade - it's now a question of whether you can be bothered to. And the great thing is that all this contact is free!"



Tim Hume of the Red Roaster in Brighton, a very well-regarded coffee-house, was way ahead of the much-vaunted vogue for 'roaster retailers', or people who roast on the café's own premises. Tim told us that one of his first discoveries as a roaster was that he could produce a far better decaf himself than anything he could buy in - but he didn't know why!

Down in Brighton, Tim quite delightfully invented an item you won't see on any menu elsewhere - the Caffe Inglese. "It's a story that is probably driven by pedantry," he told us. "We found we got a lot of customers who insisted (and I do mean insisted) on being served an 'ordinary coffee'.

"The British people think 'ordinary coffee' involves milk. So what we have done is create a drink in which we pour the espresso on to the hot water, which retains the crema, and serve with warm or cold milk on the side.

"The difference is important from the point of view of service. It's all right if coffee comes exclusively in a giant paper cup, where there's still plenty of room for additions

like milk and sugar. But if you are serving in a neat little Italian porcelain cappuccino cup you need to be a bit more precise with your measures, and you need to know if a customer wants milk or not as you have to either leave room for the milk or serve a full cup of black coffee.

"So I half-jokingly suggested that we invent an item that is exactly the same as Americano with the slight difference that it is served slightly shorter with room for milk, which we provide in a jug on the side, and that we call it Caffè Inglese.

"One day, in a fit of hubris perhaps, I decided to actually put it on the menu and see what happened. A period of customer re-training began. Today we have customers who order 'Caffè Inglese' without a blink. But we still have to ask them whether they like their milk warm or cold!"

Like many independent roasters, Peter James works from fairly rural surroundings - he's in the border country, at Ross-on-Wye, and since he got one of the Loring Smart Roasters, he has been promoting James Gourmet Coffee as 'the first eco-roaster in Europe'. He began as a micro-roaster, who came to roasting because he became just too dissatisfied with an existing supplier - and he suspects that many of his customers come to him for exactly the same reason.

"I was a contract packer, until I realised I was working with coffee which was deteriorating while we were packing it! My suppliers had been getting more inconsistent, and I was making myself a pain in the neck for them by telling them that they could ruin their own coffee if they liked, but they couldn't ruin something which was going to have my name on it - so I started roasting as something I had to do, to get it right.

"So I became a roaster. A self-taught one? Absolutely!"

That question of freshness and deterioration is a serious one. Briefly, coffee can 'keep' for a long time as a green bean, much less as a roasted one, and when that roasted bean is ground, then the clock really is ticking fast. Coffee sellers almost come to blows on this question of freshness.

A roaster who had better remain nameless once told us: "I recently tracked the progress of two bags from a very well-known roaster which I found on my local supermarket shelves. The best-by date was two years forward, and I saw them still there with two months to go. I began to estimate how many bags I had put through my roastery in that time, and wondered about how people were buying this supermarket coffee and thinking it 'fresh'.

"I thought - if people ever really start demanding truly fresh coffee, a lot of companies in this industry are going to fall over!"

Freshness is the key selling-point of roaster Oren Bloostein, who runs six coffee-shops in the heart of New York. They are all served by one roasting site, and the name Oren's Daily Roast gives the clue to his views on freshness.

"At first, I had no idea just how much people would see freshness as a big quality issue," he told us, having sat us down and put a rather nice Yirgacheffe in front of us. "The difference between day-old coffee and five days old is not, to me, that critical, except the obvious difference that the smell of a one-day-old roast will fill the room, and the five-day will just smell 'good'.

"Now, my belief is that you should only buy what you are going to use in the next week. But, despite all my pleading, some customers will insist on buying more than a week's supply. I worry that if they buy too much, they may really enjoy the first cup, but finish the packet twelve days later when it tastes just 'OK'. I want them to finish the pack after four days and still be amazed by it. So sometimes, if a customer asks for two weeks' supply, I won't sell it - I say they can have five days' supply, and then they can come back for more!"

Tasting and description of coffee is vital, even for the smallest coffee-house. There's no point in putting an obscure farm name on your specials board if you can't add: 'lovely chocolatey coffee, with a bit of a fruity taste'.

Of course, every member of staff should taste your coffee - they can't sell it if they don't know what it's like. But 'tasting' has two forms - one is simple tasting, as in brew a latte, and try it the way the customers would. Nothing wrong with that at all.

The way the roasters and professional buyers do it is by 'cupping'. In theory, every batch you buy should have been 'cupped' at many stages from the farm, so that the standard of the coffee is monitored throughout - in practice, if you ask your average salesman when he last 'cupped' his coffee, you'll receive a blank look in return.

The essential parts of a cupping are to first sniff the dry coffee. Then, after not-too-hot water has been added, the cuppers carefully remove what floats to the top before the well-known act of 'slurping'. A spoonful is raised to the lips, soup-like, and slurped noisily. There is a reason for this - the sharp intake has the effect of spraying the coffee right across the palate. (Entertainingly, professional cuppers tasting a series of coffees will haul along behind them a mobile spittoon, just like a shopping trolley on wheels!)

Watching cuppers at work in Costa Rica, *Coffee House* quickly learned to translate some of their private language. When they say 'Interesting', it can mean 'I don't know what to say about it'. If they say 'complex', that means 'I really don't know what to say about it!' And when one cupper referred to 'subtle individuality', that turned out to mean 'nobody's going to buy this'. And once we heard the quite bizarre: "tastes like a ballerina balancing on her points..."

None of this kind of stuff goes down well with Paul O'Toole, the master roaster at Bewleys, who told us: "there is a point at which you really must not get carried away with 'lingering aftertastes', and concentrate on 'does it taste like coffee?!' "

(Our favourite cupping trick is one often practised by Steve Hurst of Mercanta. He will lay out a selection of coffees, generally known as 'a table of coffees', and when the cuppers settle down to their work, they will be puzzled by one coffee which doesn't seem quite right. He will have slipped in a little cheap instant coffee, just to keep them on their toes!)

Cupping aside, when did you last taste your coffee? This is going to shake you - a surprising number of staff working in coffee houses don't know the taste of what they're serving. They simply go on shift and start pouring.

In the pub trade, it is lore that real ale should be tasted (just a quick slurp) every hour at least, to monitor quality. By contrast, in Sahar Hashemi's book on Coffee Republic,

she reports learning the lesson: "We will never forget the day our espressos came out salty. That day, thank God, I was the tenth customer - I still remember tasting my latte and wondering what the previous nine customers out there thought. Luckily, they all came back, and we gave them a free muffin with each replacement. From that day, we had a set rule that baristas have to taste the espressos themselves before selling."

Bewleys in Dublin is not just a giant company but one which has turned out an astonishing number of people who went on to become senior managers elsewhere in the trade. Their master roaster, Patrick O'Toole, is one of those few people who is widely acknowledged, even by his rivals, to be a real genuine coffee expert. He told us a delightfully simple thing about tasting coffee:

"I tend to make my decisions about buying coffee in my own room, and that's not just because I have my equipment calibrated here. I find that if you're tasting with one foot in the pool, mount Kilimanjaro in the background, and a pretty girl walking past, then the coffee will taste great.

"But when you get back home, it will taste brutal!"

Whatever you do, and all roasters agree on this, is never buy coffee on the basis of price. Buy on taste.

As Marco Olmi of Drury once told us (his family roasted the first espresso for the London coffee-bar boom of the 1950s) there are lots of top espresso coffees being roasted by very clever roasters around the UK, and many of them are well worth £10-£20 a kilo. There are also many very good-quality everyday coffees at around £8-£9 a kilo. The problem in the hospitality trade is that much of the hotel and restaurant trade is driven by accountants, who insist that £3 per kilo is as much as a hotel should spend on coffee. "You can get a pretty good coffee at £9 a kilo", Marco told us, "but you certainly will not get a good coffee at £5 a kilo."

It was Marco who once told us 'you're not a real roaster until you've had a fire,' something we repeated to Ian Steel, the roaster at Atkinson's in Lancaster. He replied:

"I bought Atkinsons from an old guy who reluctantly stayed on a week to see me started... and I had a fire in my first week. The old guy said - first, do not get flustered, and show the staff that you're not flustered. Second, put the burning stuff in this container. Third, take it out and put it out in't car park across't street..."

"And if you can put it next to a Porsche, so much t'better!"



Something which arouses wild emotions in just about every coffee roaster is the vexed subject of Fairtrade coffee. Cause-related coffee, sold in aid of charity, is all very well... but does it mean anything to the coffee-house trade? Does anybody feel we have a duty about the plight of impoverished growers? For a little experiment, our editor slipped in a question about it to every coffee-house owner he spoke to during a certain period. Responses ranged from 'of course we know about it, but what can we do?' to one quite blatant 'not our problem...'

In general, the coffee trade is certainly interested in ethical matters. An admirable example is that of Bill Fishbein, founder of Coffee Kids, who told us: "I had been in

coffee for 25 years, an industry which drew me out of a financial abyss into security - and then, when I went to Guatemala, I found poverty, the like of which I still have trouble coming to terms with. I also found a great, powerful, strong-willed people, of a kind lacking in my own world. I began to wonder which of us was impoverished.

"I couldn't go on as I had been before. When I had started in coffee, I thought life was all about money, and now I realised it isn't. But we found that these people are the most creative people - they have visions, and they have dreams, and something we could do is help actualise them. So we fund things for them. We fund them to start their own businesses, making tortillas, making shoes, opening shops, running mid-wifery clinics. And we have found while most of the world's poor farmers are leaving their farms, those working with us are staying there."

There are many such stories. Brian Chapman, founder of Percol, is interested in a variety of causes to help through coffee sales, and some of them are truly fascinating. One of his favourites is the Kogi Indians, a tribe in Colombia who have grown their own rainforest coffee for hundreds of years, and are effectively diligent guardians of their own way of life.

Brian could only be taken to meet them by helicopter, and a fellow-passenger had to be the tribal chief, or the community would never have been found. The Kogi guard their civilization so closely that only two members of the tribe are allowed to go into the city a year. When those two return, they are stripped of all material possessions and forbidden to talk about what they have seen in the outside world - if they do, they are expelled from the community.

Roasters are often a cafe-owner's link with the ethical side of coffee. And most frequently, this will be because a cafe asks their supplier for a Fairtrade coffee, which has become the generic name for ethically-traded coffee.

But Fairtrade is in fact only one of the ethical certifications, and it is not universally popular among coffee roasters.

What annoys many roasters is that the Fairtrade Mark is seen as a sign of quality, which it is not. One of our most experienced coffee importers, who pays a great deal to small farmers, did a big promotion in Selfridges and was told by a lady doctor, pompously, 'it will help your marketing campaign if you join Fairtrade and get its symbol of approval on your coffee...' His response was 'approval, my ****!', but his point was that consumers do not really understand fair-trading issues.

Many roasters say they have a Fairtrade line because they have to, not because they want to - that is, they roast it because of consumer demand, even though many of them still question the general quality of Fairtrade. The buyer for the Co-op once told us: "The earliest 'cause' coffee was called 'suffering' coffee - every time you drank it, you showed your solidarity with the farmers by suffering!"

Roaster Peter James summed it up when saying: "Sorry, Fairtrade coffee hasn't improved. In some of the Fairtrade samples we have been sent, the green beans are reminiscent of a dead person's wardrobe, mothballs and all. The roasted coffee is not quite as bad, but you wouldn't drink it for pleasure."

There is a counter argument, of course - several Fairtrade coffees have cropped up in

the Great Taste awards, and Cafedirect's Macchu Picchu has been generally approved of in coffee review circles.

Many unenthusiastic roasters refer to the Fairtrade Foundation, which licenses the farms qualified to supply coffee under the Fairtrade Mark, as 'full of idiosyncratic bureaucracy', 'too interested in seizing the moral high ground', and 'in a commercial world, they come across as part commercial, part librarian'. But the same suppliers do also say, in fairness: 'you can also see them as a beacon'.

The Foundation's master-stroke was in picking an accreditation name which turned into a generic description. Fairtrade with a capital 'F' is the term, but the confusing result is that when customers enquire verbally whether a coffee is 'fairtrade', misunderstandings are likely... and there have been cases of deliberate mis-labelling.

Independent importers say that Fairtrade's statement is a clever but misleading use of language, because the Foundation cannot, of course, claim to have the only coffee on the market which has been sourced in a perfectly ethical and fair way.

Objections do not just come from inside the coffee trade. There have been many reports by economists to show that Fairtrade cannot save poor farmers, and the leader of a Lancashire council once tried to block local moves towards Fairtrade Town status, saying that it is bureaucratic, doesn't offer the best-quality goods, and is 'counter-productive to market choice'. In the south, the Surrey press reported that the Elmbridge council had thrown out a proposal to become a Fairtrade borough because customers were being 'seduced' by a 'warm cuddly racket'.

It does not help that Fairtrade's own public statements do tend to be a little self-righteous and idealistic, which just exasperates the coffee trade even more. It was Simon Bower of the Pollards roastery who called us to say that he was going to be put up against a Fairtrade spokesman in a Radio 4 interview, and was worried that he would be up against the high-powered logic of a professional campaigner. After the show he called again, clearly shaking with laughter, to report that his opponent had been wildly out of touch with coffee trade issues: "there are no coffee shortages, no farmers are renegeing on contracts, the moon is made of cheese, and aliens have taken over the royal family...!"

The best advocate of Fairtrade is the extremely opinionated but highly-delightful chief of the Fairtrade Foundation, Harriet Lamb – even those in the coffee trade who profoundly disagree with her will agree that she thoroughly deserved her CBE for the way she sticks to her beliefs. Harriet talks in plain language, not the self-righteous PR-waffle of so many ethical organisations.

Recently, one of our major coffee importers remarked that at a time of high coffee prices, Fairtrade's message is "an old business model well after its time, which has blown itself out in many markets... the cutting-edge roasting businesses are not interested in their outdated message."

Harriet Lamb retorted instantly that the top coffee prices paid by 'cutting-edge' roasters are a dream, for the vast majority of coffee farmers: "For these farmers, all that talk about top grades and top prices are a dream. Even in times of high prices, there are still millions of farmers below the poverty line, and this is a scandal. The situation in the

Congo is so bad that we have farmers swimming overnight into Rwanda with coffee sacks on their back, to get a better price.

"Don't tell me that all coffee farmers are doing well! If you think this battle is over, you're fooling yourself."

Other members of the Foundation would do well to copy her plain talk, and ditch their usual holier-than-thou approach. This was shown at one of the most entertaining trade meetings ever held, an Allegra coffee summit where the economist Peter Griffiths, known for his argument that coffee farmers can do better through free trade, was put on a panel with a representative from Fairtrade and several other ethical sourcing organisations, such as the Rainforest Alliance. Griffiths held nothing back, and there was very nearly blood on the carpet, when he demanded precise trading information which the Fairtrade representative clearly could not give - he had arrived assuming that his Fairtrade halo would get him through anything. Among coffee roasters, it does not!

There is also some exaggeration of Fairtrade status - one of the biggest ethical brands once called us to crow about being third in the *Readers Digest* most-trusted brands. We checked with *Readers Digest*, who said 'actually, they came fourth'. Bang goes their reputation as a 'trusted brand'! (It was the same brand that trumpeted that the London Olympics had been 'declared Fairtrade'. They weren't - it was just the organisers' preference, which is a totally different thing.)

And among cafe owners, even dedicated independent Fairtrade supporters worry about aspects of the ethical business, most notably when the big names get involved. One said to us: "Grassroots Fairtrade is fantastic, but when the big names gain publicity for the little Fairtrade content they use, but don't change the way they do business throughout the rest of their company, it makes me feel a little sick....I try to see the bright side of large corporations supporting Fairtrade to their chosen degree, but unfortunately it just waters down the whole effect when it's used as a marketing trick to raise the profile of their name and make people believe that all their product is Fairtrade.

"So, I'm struggling with this....I don't know who is right or who is wrong."

Some of the ethical organisations themselves acknowledge that for giant companies to adopt their badge can be a double-edged sword. Stuart Singleton-White of the Rainforest Alliance told us that when Mars and Magnum took on his frog logo, trade opinion was divided - "critics do ask whether a big brand's heart really is in things like this, but they do get the figures!"

The coffee trade is certainly not against ethical buying of coffee - some parts of the trade just believe in better ways. The importer Ian Breminer told us: "You need to understand what the UK consumer is in favour of - and we, as a country, are in favour of helping people. You will not find that in many other European countries - many other countries give more impetus to the environment than to the health of the people. So, any independent cafe operator must ask : what is important to my public? For the public in this country, Fairtrade reflects their interest."

There is of course a great danger of over-romancing the idea of the artisan peasant

farmer. A tea importer of our acquaintance once told us, in which is probably a highly politically-incorrect slur, but in exasperation over one particular supplier: "I've learned one thing from working with Indian tea farmers... they're all bloody liars!"

A rather more reasoned view came from Ian Balmforth of Bolling Coffee in Yorkshire, who has often commented on fair trading in coffee. He said to us: "if you have a warm fuzzy glowing vision of Fairtrade farmers, you might be wrong – they're just the same as business people all round the world. They can cheat, lie, and worm their way out of anything... it's just something you have to accept." He is, it has to be said, been sufficiently sympathetic to Fairtrade to briefly sit on his local Fairtrade Valley committee.

So what is the general lot of the coffee farmer? Some people say the image of Juan Valdez on his donkey is wildly out-of-date - some say it's true.

The donkey is still an essential part of this trade – importer Simon Wakefield tells of farms in the Dominican Republic where only donkeys and horses can get through to carry all the cherries to the wet mill. In some Peruvian farms, the only practical way to carry the crop is in wheelbarrows!

"The last thing you want to come back as is a donkey!" Simon told us. "They have bloody hard lives in these countries. We do now see more motorbikes, which can be the next best thing to get around in some places. Four-wheel drives are certainly not found across the board, although when you do see them, you see them used for what they were really made for, which is not driving around Chelsea.

"Yes, we are certainly talking of places with dry latrines, no power cables, and towns which may have only one place with water and a generator... and one of those I stayed in doubled as a brothel!

"Yes, it is a simple life. But does that make it a worse life? No, I don't think so, because many of these people are happy."

There are a vast number of individual projects by which members of the coffee trade



actively help farmers, or the environment, or both.

Union Hand-Roasted can reasonably claim to be among the few people who revived the post-genocide Rwanda coffee industry. The Heaven and Earth Show, on BBC's Sunday morning God-slot, sent the wine writer Oz Clarke to the Maraba area of Rwanda, whose super bourbon coffee has become a Union best-seller, to report on the progress of the farmers, many of them genocide widows. The local newspaper had reported the previous day that thirty-one coffee farmers in the Maraba district had been recognised by the University of Rwanda for their active participation in coffee growing. Ildephonse Gasana was named the best farmer, and quite charmingly, his prizes included a hoe and a goat. On the BBC programme, Oz Clarke was later seen being treated to a meal of goat by coffee farmers. We profoundly hope the two events were not related...

The coffee trade has many other ethical projects. Some in the trade like to go with coffee from the Cup of Excellence auctions, in which small farmers are encouraged to work for quality of product above all else, and are rewarded for it in the prices paid -

twenty dollars a kilo is not unknown, and we think the record price is somewhere around forty dollars, or around twenty times the commodity market price. Steve Hurst of Mercanta told us that he had once watched the reaction of a small farming family who had come up with a super crop, and who were listening as the bids for their coffee came in. Surprise gave way to disbelief and then floods of tears as the farmer realised that what they were going to get for one super crop had effectively wiped out the family's entire debts.

Many in the trade like to buy coffee which supports environmental causes. The Miko organisation, which has the Puro brand and owns half a dozen trade distributors around Britain, actually owns and conserves its own rainforests. It really has saved certain species from extinction.

And many environmentally-minded cafe operators support the Rainforest Alliance, which campaigns for environmental stewardship, and which can quote the most famous line of all about climate change: if the entire internet goes down, it sets us back only twenty years. If the climate goes, we all go back to the book of Genesis.

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10. And the winner is... The glory of trade awards

It really is astonishing how keen the coffee industry gets on competitions and awards - and the more it does so, the more Kaldi is inclined to avoid them.

Elliott Gard, running the Caffe Culture show, remarked to us very early on in the show's life that he had toyed with the idea of awards in the conventional show sense, but had decided not to do so.. 'until he was absolutely sure they would mean something'.

And there is the rub. Why do so many trade 'awards' mean nothing at all? Is it because they are run for the wrong reasons, are meaningless, or simply bent?

It would be pushing it to say that all awards and contests are bent... but a few quite certainly are.

In the days of Kaldi's musical career, the audience at a talent contest in Aberdeen were once so annoyed at the judge's decision, the judging committee had to lock themselves in the loo for an hour until the angry crowd dispersed.

Slightly earlier in that musical career, Kaldi was playing in a usually-excellent cabaret trio which was forced to take part in the Edinburgh Evening News 'search for a star' contest because the band's agent thought it would help business. And anyway, he was on the judging panel. The trio, which didn't believe in talent contests, did its best to drink the bar dry before going on, and we were quite appalling... but we still went through to the next round. The judge-agent stormed into the dressing room afterwards and shouted: 'yez were bloody awful - do you realize how much it cost me to get you through?'

Does the same happen in any industry awards?

Candidly, you do have to be careful in any kind of trade competition, particularly if sponsor companies are involved. We have fairly good evidence of sponsors finding ways to block competition entries from people supplied by rivals, and we also have evidence of some suppliers volunteering to be judges, and then selling to the people they are supposed to be evaluating! (To be fair, there was a recent example of the reverse, in which a chap who was judging coffee-houses was so impressed by the standard of one roaster-retailer, he became a trade customer).

Kaldi was once involved in judging a café contest which had come down to the last two contestants - our vote went to the one which was a very notable award-winning tea-room, and the other was run by someone well-known in the coffee trade. The head judge, someone else known in the coffee trade, called and said 'it will give me a big problem if the tea-room wins'. Guess which one got the prize?

And there are downright lies, too. The entry forms for one trade contest, for which

the prize was a trip to a sponsor's overseas factory, included a quote from the previous year's winner saying what a wonderful time he'd had there. The sponsor told me that the winner had never ever taken the trip... would you ever believe that contest organiser on anything else?

Fortunately, most competition stories are funny. One of those over-subsidised quangos once ran a contest for new office furniture design, and I was called in to report on the winner - this was, I promise, an angled board which you put on your desk and cuddled so you could take a power nap without leaving the workplace.

The quango chairman stressed to me the genius of the designer in making the prototype entirely white, so that when it was sent out for product testing, the testers could write their comments in felt-tip on the product itself. "Do you see the genius of this?" he asked, in a phrase which has haunted me ever since. "The user can interact with the artefact..."

I was also required to judge companies in a management contest, which involved travelling to see directors in their own offices. In one office in Somerset, it was a hot sunny afternoon, and it had been a long journey. A few minutes of that interview are a complete mystery... did I nod off in mid-conversation? Well, I could hardly ask. It was certainly very fortunate that they won.

Meanwhile, the Castle Hotel in Taunton, run by the man who wrote several volumes of the Great British Chefs collection, once received a tip-off that the Michelin judge was going to arrive for lunch that day, and their star depended on it. When one lone male appeared for lunch, the entire staff descended on him... never has one man been so pampered and cosseted during a lunch. Of course, he turned out not to be the Michelin judge!

While judging some café awards, I went twice to one seaside hotel in Falmouth (where, by coincidence, we have recently been living). On the first, I walked into reception on a pouring wet day, sopping wet, and the receptionists laughed. That was worth immediate disqualification, but we gave them a second chance - my family and puppy were outside getting soaked, so could they come in while I did the judging? The response was a flat 'no dogs'.

Of course, the correct customer-service response would have been: 'we don't allow dogs in the café area, sir, but if your family cares to sit here in reception, we'll bring tea to them while you talk to the café manager.'

But we gave them yet another chance and I went back the next day. As I neared the hotel at about 10am, a hotel lackey in standard waistcoat and name-badge uniform was putting out a local roaster's A-board which said 'coffee, latte, cappuccino, espresso...' Oh good, I said, you're serving coffee. 'No', said the lackey sourly, 'we're not open until midday', and he stalked back into the hotel. I have often wondered why neither he nor the management thought it odd that he was putting out an advertising sign for something which they weren't actually selling at the time. Instant disqualification.

Beverage trade contests very rarely get any exposure in the national media, mainly because trade associations know very little about publicity, and partly because there is no money available to pay for any. This is silly, because there is only one point of any

beverage contest – that is, to promote the coffee and tea trades, so more punters are inspired to try a new coffee, a special tea, or to go into a coffee house or tea room. The Tea Guild's awards, paid for by the tea industry, are all over the classy magazines, and the AA publishes a special guide to the winning tea-rooms every year - beside this, the identity of the world champion barista is largely unknown, and speciality coffee is still regarded as a novelty subject by the media. (A contest for making a cup of coffee? How odd...)

However, some budget problems are understandable - when Simon Martin of Quickfire Tableware (the people in Sheffield who produce own-brand café crockery) was chairman of some café awards, he had the quite brilliant idea of having the prizes presented by an actor who plays a café owner in Coronation Street on TV. Apparently the fee for an evening's work was the same as this magazine's editor earns in several years... pity, it would have been a fine way for the beverage trade to have got into the tabloids.

(It was also Simon who discovered an extremely unusual winner in another contest. He was running a roulette promotion on his stand at the Caffè Culture show, and the winner was, believe it or not, Coffee, Cake and Kink, 'the UK's only erotic café and gallery'.)



Some beverage-related contests do get national exposure, but not the ones run by the trade itself. The AA motoring organisation ran a super national contest for the best cup of tea served in roadside cafes - its mobile repairmen, it was pointed out, know virtually every cup of tea to be had in every roadside café in Britain. They weren't at all interested in a delicate oolong or jasmine... but they could judge the correct serving temperature for a cup of straightforward cabbies' tea to the nearest degree.

Cabbies' tea is of course also known as builders' tea, and comes in as part of a nice little contest run by Magnet, the trade builders' merchants. This contest is to find Britain's best builders' breakfast, which largely consists of EBCB - that really is a standard term. It means 'eggs, bacon, chips and beans', and there are websites devoted to the best EBCB in the UK. We have often thought that if tea and coffee contests took a few tips from contests like this, and climbed down the scale of pretentiousness a little, we would get a lot more general media attention.

Some catering-trade contests are almost unbelievable - there actually is a contest and a title for folding table napkins. It's worth seeing, not just for the origami-like skill of the experts, but for the ideas it gives in table presentation.

The question of subjective judgment in trade awards is a dangerous one. In the course of a previous life which has involved many trade magazines, I was once sent to judge the mild ale section of the annual beer festival at Olympia. At the time I was off the booze completely, and thought of mild ale as dishwater. So I just picked the one which tasted least of dishwater and gave it the prize... and was regally praised by the entire real ale trade for my perceptiveness in picking Bateman's brewery of East Anglia. That was sheer luck for the judge.

A contest which has come in for a lot of debate about its subjectivity is the annual Great Taste Awards, a quite immense annual contest run by the Guild of Fine Food, in which everything from ice-cream to pork pies is judged. There are thousands of entrants, hundreds of gold stars are awarded, and in the delicatessen market, the star can do great things for sales.

There are large tea and coffee sections, and we will truthfully say that at first we did wonder just how testing the criteria for these were... until the day Kaldi found himself at the judges' table. The strictness of the judging, by tasters we are not allowed to name, was breathtaking in its severity - when a really great product is discovered, the judges really do celebrate, but when faced with something below par, they hold nothing back. The kindest adverse comment was "there's nothing really wrong with this coffee, but there's nothing really right with it either - mark it as 'mainly harmless!'"

That was nothing compared to what was handed out to coffees whose entry for a Great Taste award was deemed to be just far too ambitious: typical criticisms were "not so much roasted as fag-ash... a hint of cordite!", and "this one has something petrochemical about it". The most enduring insult was reserved for one big brand which had entered its French Blend coffee. Having brewed it, one judge remarked: "It's French - I think it's Eau de Gauloise!"

Barista championships are an entirely different hazard.

They are for fanatics. They have to be - the standard requirement is to serve an espresso to each of four judges, then a cappuccino to each of four judges, and then a 'signature drink', made to a recipe of the barista's own devising. The first part of it, the espressos and cappuccinos, is the coffee equivalent of 'dressage' in equestrian contests - it is the technical bit, and it is necessary, but to watch a dozen competitors making those drinks can, unless you are absolutely committed to the detail of it, be a little wearying.

This is, in the memorable words of one supplier, about as exciting as watching darts



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on television - which of course, makes it all the more curious that he went on to become a sponsor of the UK championship for several years.

To be fair, his view has had top-level support. Tim Wendelboe of Norway, a former world champ himself, raised something we have often complained about (but being a champ, he got away with it!) Tim wrote that barista championships have missed their major point, the promotion of the speciality coffee industry to the general public, by getting too self-obsessed.

"While I was watching the Russian barista competition, something came to my mind; I couldn't see the barista. There were seven judges, one camera man, one compere, a time keeper and a runner on stage and they were all running around and hiding the poor barista who was trying to perform at her best.

"I said to myself 'no wonder this is not a very audience-friendly competition - I can't see the competitor at all'."

The Costa chain had a brilliant alternative idea. At their in-house contest, they got their cappuccinos and espressos over in the morning, then let the audience in for the visually-interesting bits, the speciality drinks.

At the old Brasilia barista contests, which ran up to about 2003, the baristas worked from stalls ranged around the top floor of the Kensington Roof Gardens, rather like a church hall fete. The judges, instead of taking the usual glory spot and blocking everyone else's view, operated a roving brief. The audience were free to wander all round the front of the stalls, getting a close-up view of each barista as he or she worked. Nice change from seeing the backs of the cameramen, who are often zooming in on the wrong thing anyway.

And there are very few decent MCs or commentators at barista championships. This is not a cruel observation - those who are picked for the job are usually well-known people from the trade, which means they know the subject, but it does not mean they are good speakers, and most of them run out of ideas and dry up fairly quickly. In the old Brasilia contests, they hired broadcaster Stuart Hall as compere - he's the football commentator with a literary turn of phrase, and also MC'd the lunatic *It's a Knockout* (*Jeux Sans Frontieres*) on TV all those years ago. The value of a professional talker shone through. He was never lost for words.

From the trade, probably the best comment from a compere was the the one-liner delivered by Stephen Hurst of Mercanta, while introducing a competitor from the No Sign coffee bar. You could see the smile appearing as he realised the obvious next line, and delivered it: 'so, do you actually get any customers....?'

It is the stories surrounding barista championships which are often more entertaining than the event.

There was something vaguely traditional about the idea of Russia holding its barista contest on National Women's Day, and we enjoyed a story which Mark Prince of Coffeegeek, the forum for coffee nuts, told us about the world finals held in the USA. Apparently the Australian participant was very upset to find that his roasted coffee, which he had arranged to be specially shipped from down under, hadn't arrived. Having a coffee in the hotel, he happened to ask the management what coffee they

were using. Oh, said the management, some Australian company has sent us a parcel of sample coffee, so we're using that... yes, you've guessed!

Contests do however bring out some wonderful performances, and it's true that they can make stars.

Probably the guy who went on to the most widespread general-public interest after winning a barista contest is Paul Bassett, world champ in 2003. He played the fame game perfectly - he became the public face of a coffee-machine company, and made a TV series about his travels around the world in search of good coffee and cafes. It was relatively low-budget ('made on the smell of an oily rag', he told us in Aussie terminology) but is still regularly shown on satellite TV channels all round the world. It's entertaining, if very Australian - at times, it is as if the guys in the bar in Crocodile Dundee had discovered espresso.

Our favourite performance in the UK barista championship was back in 2003, when Simon Robertson of Leoni's in Yorkshire, a three-time champion, appeared in front of the judges in spotless white shirt and bow tie, with long waiter's apron, making a casual but stately entrance bearing an extremely large block of ice with mint leaves set inside it.



It was obvious - Something Was Going To Happen, and the tone of the entire event changed from that moment. Robertson laid his block of ice down on the competitors' table, turned and shook hands with his rivals and wished them good luck, gave the audience a friendly nod, and proceeded to astonish the entire gathering.

Working calmly, precisely, and almost expressionless except for the occasional dry aside to the judges, he produced a samovar filled with molten chocolate, and what at first appeared to be toffee apples - laying these on the ice-block, he poured molten chocolate over them, and left them. After serving the judges his espressos and cappuccinos, Simon turned back to the ice-block, where the chocolate had now solidified. What had seemed to be toffee-apples turned out to be balloons filled with a non-freezing liquid of some kind. He gently burst them, poured out the contents, removed the now-flat balloons from the chocolate surrounds, and displayed the result - four neat chocolate cups.

These he calmly filled with a chilled coffee drink, and served to the four judges, whose attention he now had in entirety, suggesting that they drink through a straw, and consider it either a beverage or a dessert. It was, said one of them later, 'rather like drinking an After-Eight mint'.

Another entrant expressed it more forcefully. "Competing with Simon," he remarked, "is rather like playing Brazil at football!"

Barista championship tradition says that ingredients for a speciality drink seem to go in trends - some years, everyone seems to be using rose-water, other years they all go for chocolate. (The administrator of the world contest a few years back told us of

an Australian speciality entry which included a strip of kangaroo meat - thankfully, a one-off!)

How important is the concept of the 'signature drink', the one of the contestant's own devising?

Thomas Polti of the Chequers in Millbrook, a little village outside Bedford, runs probably the only pub in Britain with a collection of barista awards decorating the bar - two firsts, three seconds, and a third in domestic competitions, and from one of the very first international contests, one marking fifth place in the world.

"I very strongly believe a 'signature' drink should be practical - not something which takes you fifteen minutes, just to impress the judges and look pretty in a photograph. Well, it's very easy to be proud of a complicated signature drink and put it on the menu, until on a Saturday night you hear someone asking for three espressos, two lattes, two beers, a gin, and two signature drinks... and you think 'oh ****, I've put it on the menu now, I can't say I haven't got time to do it, because people will ask if I'm a winner or not'.

"In one contest where we were allowed to work with alcohol, my Highland Fling was whisky liqueur, Kahlua, cream and coffee... and we still sell a lot. It takes me a minute, and I can do it as part of several jobs at once. Doing only one thing at once is what wastes your time - learning how many things you can do at once is a good skill."

Polti comes from the school which believes baristas should dress well. He once told us that before competitions, he would have sleepless nights over which bow-tie to wear. More recently, it is fashionable for barista entrants to look as if they've just woken up on a park bench. This would not have impressed the fashion house Armani, who wanted to run a coffee-bar in a pop-up shop, and demanded that applicants send a photograph, to show whether they were handsome and smart enough to work for the brand.

There are those who say barista contests as we know them have had their day - there are others who say that the concept will develop, for everyone's benefit. John Gordon, our recent UK champ, remarked once that every barista should go in for contests, because of what they can learn, and there is a school of thought that says this will develop in the less-than-elite sector - that is, an increase in the 'more fun, less nerve-racking' kind of contests, which will still be very valuable in providing baristas with experience and get-togethers. Frankly, it's a development we look forward to seeing.

If coffee contests don't win cafes any publicity, there is one prize which is guaranteed to get in the papers. Several coffee houses have done it - typically Badgers of Llandudno, which has a string of these certificates running up its stairs. It is the Loo of the Year awards, run by the catchily-titled British Toilet Association.

Now, don't laugh at this, because it's a deadly serious subject. The kind of publicity that those awards get really does go round the world - a hotel which once won a Gold award for its washrooms experienced a record year for tourists immediately afterwards. Barry Mortlock of Coffee Culture in Wales, who used to run Badgers in its award years, tells us that people really do visit him because of his famous loos. We have another story of a caterer who found a group of Japanese tourists at his door,

waving a magazine page at him - it was the report of his Loo of the Year success. It works!

(Along the same lines, though not in competition, the smallest room can be extremely profitable. The Mary B coffee house in Padstow decided to brighten up its loo walls by hanging pictures by local artists - the first week, they sold one at £400. And do you know what one of the most valuable advertising spaces is? It's on the wall of a public loo - and, for obvious reasons, the gents'. There are agencies who buy space on such walls for their advertising clients, so if you happen to have a washroom which is regularly visited by hundreds of customers, you may have a source of income on the walls.)

And contests in speciality coffee get even more bizarre. The name for an informal latte art contest is a 'throwdown', which always makes us giggle, but the biggest such contest, in Seattle, once sent us a notice which read: 'The Millrock Free-Pour Latte Art Championship is gathering steam as the annual contest adds blind judging.'

Well, nobody's going to win that, then!

One of the nicest things we heard in trade awards was the reaction of Simon Bower, the roaster from Pollards in Sheffield, who was recognised by a local business chamber dinner in reward for his charity work. "It was daunting," Simon told us. "Well, you just try accepting an award for philanthropy after five glasses of wine... and I did better than the guy who presented it to me!"

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11 . And finally...

Dear reader, if you are not at the moment running a coffee-shop or tea-room, we do profoundly hope that nothing in this book has put you off. Because, for all the lunacies and problems which do exist in this trade, the fact still remains that through our magazine, we are privileged to know several hundreds of people who have such fun running their own hospitality businesses that they really would not want to do anything else for a living, however much it paid.

It's just as entertaining for us – we would probably have done a lot better out of the coffee trade if we had started a cafe instead of a magazine, but for sheer enjoyment, you can't beat this job. We love being the industry's news source.

We exist not just to bring you the news, but also to warn against problems which may affect the trade – for example, our newsflash one April 1st drew an unprecedented flood of responses from the trade, all of whom appreciated the warning we had put out.

This was the news of the impending European Cappuccino Directive, which would make it compulsory for all caterers serving coffee to comply with certain requirements regarding the amount of foam on the cappuccino they served. We reported that the European Froth Sub-committee demanded that the customer should be able to see exactly how much of their drink is composed of froth, and so all caterers would be required to mark their chosen 'froth line' on both the inside and outside of takeaway cups and chinaware. Takeaway cup lids would have to be made of a suitable see-through material, so that the customer could inspect the drink offered to them, and every cafe owner would be required to sign the Cappuccino Register, held at their local Trading Standards Office, which would register their cup sizes and 'froth line' measurements.

Now it so happens that many of our readers are suppliers to the cafe trade, and many of them find it useful to pass on to their customers pieces of our news. Some of them certainly could not resist passing on this important piece of information on the first day of April, and one such helpful supplier was Alice Edgcumbe-Rendle, of Edgcumbes in Arundel, who felt it her duty to warn her catering-trade customers.

And she got herself into trouble. Because one of those customers actually believed it...!

Happy days in the coffee trade. Is it any wonder we enjoy it so much?

We hope you do too!

Boughton's COFFEE HOUSE

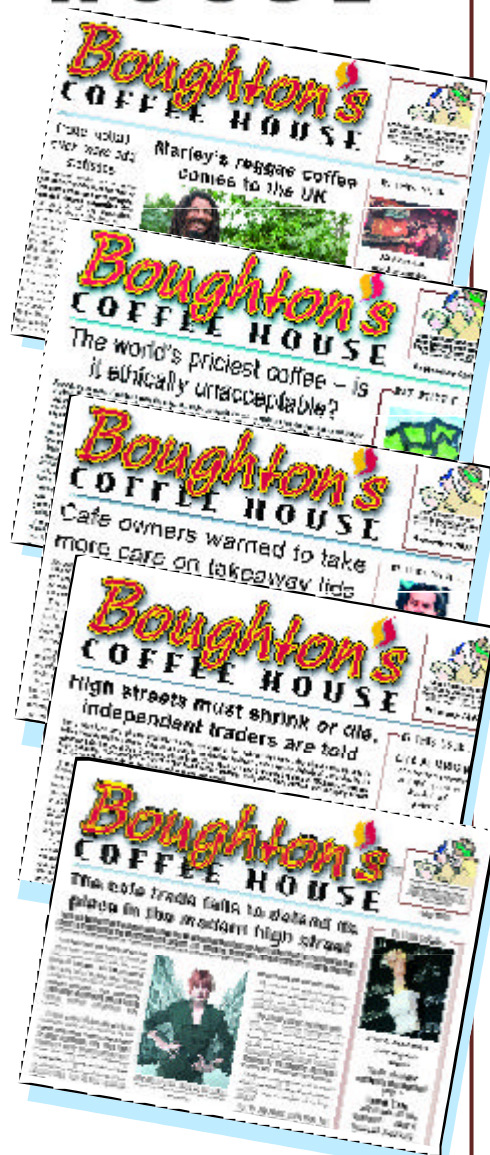
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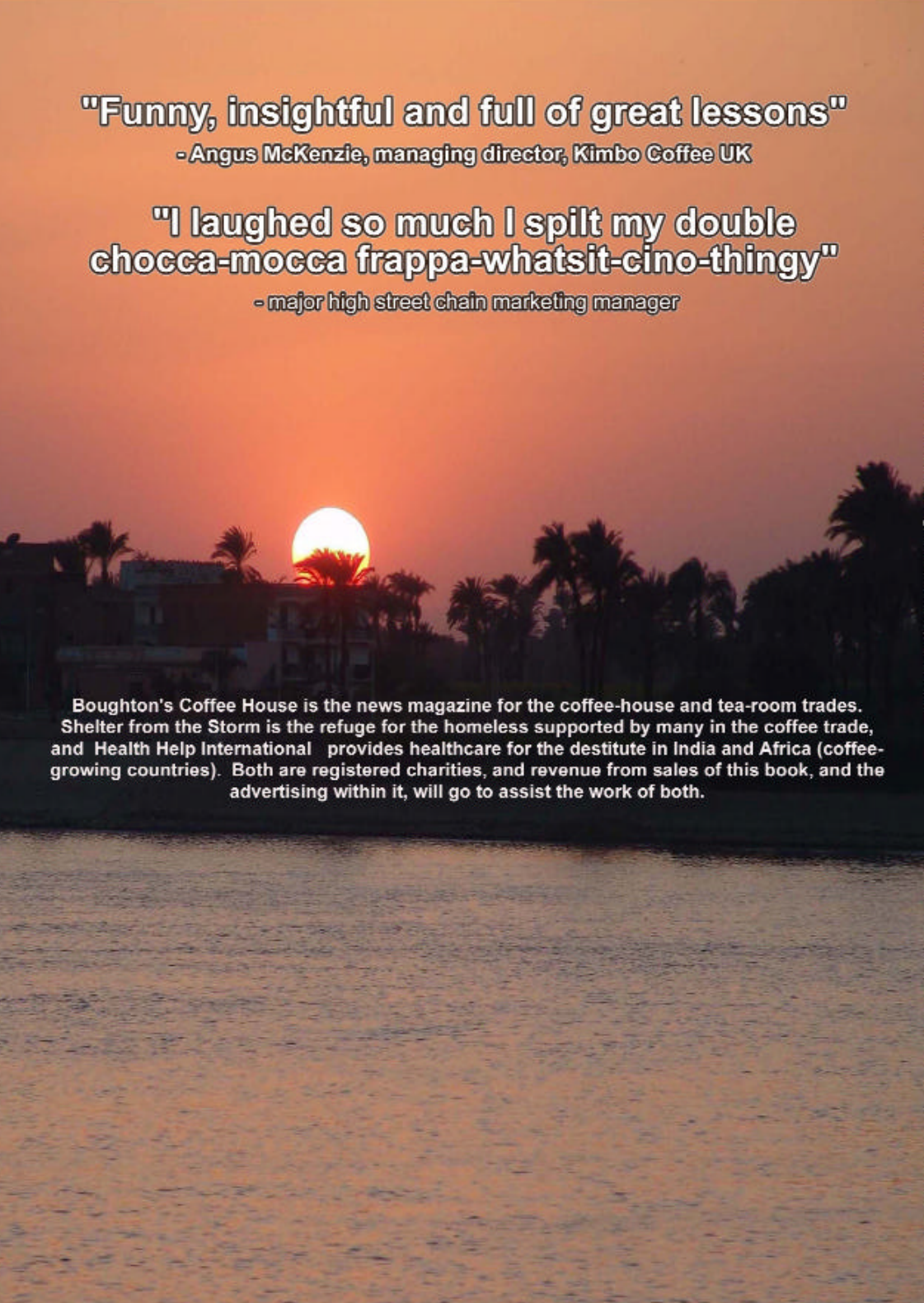
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Boughton's Coffee House is the news magazine for the coffee-house and tea-room trades. Shelter from the Storm is the refuge for the homeless supported by many in the coffee trade, and Health Help International provides healthcare for the destitute in India and Africa (coffee-growing countries). Both are registered charities, and revenue from sales of this book, and the advertising within it, will go to assist the work of both.

