

Coffee

What happened to coffee? I'm not that old, but I remember when you could walk into a coffee shop and order coffee. The waitress would bring you a heavy ceramic mug that had been through the dishwasher numerous times, she'd splash some brown liquid in it and point at the sugar and cream dispenser on your table. At a lot of restaurants, the table setting used to consist of a paper napkin and a coffee spoon. It was like that was considered a meal. Why has coffee become so difficult?

Today when I want a cup of joe, I have to decide what kind of coffee I want. The first decision is Starbucks or Peet's, or Java City or Seattle's Finest. I don't live in Seattle, I'd like Belmont's finest. Even San Francisco's finest is close enough. I worry that if I don't choose Seattle's finest, I'll get a runner-up. Not that I'll be able to taste the difference.

When I walk into a coffee shop, I remember when that meant you could get eggs and hash browns with your cup. I'm flabbergasted at the coffee menu. Is a Carmel Macchiato coffee? I'm suspicious of anything that's called coffee that doesn't come in a heavy ceramic mug.

I'm intimidated by the kid behind the counter with blue hair and metal rings in his lips and eyebrow. I know it's not the hair; the waitress in the old coffee shop had blue hair as well. It's the questions that bother me. Non-fat or regular? Wet or dry? Extra hot? Do you want room? I came in for coffee, not to play twenty questions. And since when is something called Grandé, a medium?

My kids think I'm old fashioned. My seventeen year old rolls her eyes on the rare occasion that we go to Starbucks together. First she asked me to wait outside, so that I wouldn't embarrass her, now I'm allowed to go in with her. She insists on ordering for me. She doesn't drink coffee at home. But she goes to Starbucks. That sealed it for me, that stuff isn't really coffee.

"What do you want?" She asks me.

"Coffee." I reply. She rolls her eyes again, I'm being difficult.

"You can't order just coffee." She tells me.

"Why not? We're in a coffee shop aren't we?" I insist. A deep sigh is the result.

She decides that the closest thing to coffee that will satisfy my taste and is still cool to order is Espresso. She's probably right, I've traveled across Europe and it doesn't matter what language is spoken, ordering an Espresso always results in the same satisfying little cup of dark brew.

"Venti Espresso!" She tells the blue haired kid with the lip ring. I wait, it's a good thing we're not in Italy, I think. An order like that would result in twenty little cups lined up on the counter.

“A Venti gets you three shots. You’ll be flying.” She reassures me. Her name is called; we pick up our drinks and leave. Somehow drinking an espresso out of a paper cup with cardboard wrapped around it doesn’t satisfy me.

“Is it good?” She turns to ask me as she sips her concoction which doesn’t even smell like something that has coffee in it.

“Hmmm.” Is the only safe reply I can muster. She worked in one of these cafes a year or so ago so she knows all about coffee drinks. Her experience didn’t rub off on me; it just proved to her that I wasn’t cool when it comes to drinking it.

I’m not giving up though. If I have to go to Starbucks by myself I order a medium Espresso. The kid behind the counter usually gives me the same look that my daughter gives me and translates that into Starbuckspeak. When I’m lucky, I get a serving of the brown liquid that I crave. I find that I don’t enjoy it as much as the coffee in the bottomless ceramic mug served on a formica counter while sitting in a vinyl covered chair.

My wife came to my rescue recently by buying an automatic espresso machine. Beans go in one side, water in the other. You set your cup under the spout, press a button and you have espresso. I like it, life is simple and I’m not intimidated. Now, if I could get one of the kids to help decide if I should buy Sumatra, French Roast or Dark Columbian beans in the supermarket, I’ll be able to get a cup of joe and get on with my day.