

MY DRUG OF CHOICE
VICTORIA STOPPIELLO

At Three Creeks Lake, 6500 feet elevation, camping, 7 a.m., I'm waiting for coffee to emerge from the fire. Feeling a little grouchy because I'm not getting my coffee as quickly as I'm used to. Realizing that as I look over my coffee supplies, they are limited, and I wonder if they will last the trip. This reminds me that I'm an addict, a caffeine addict, coffee addict, whatever label you want to put on it, but I'm both physically and psychologically hooked.

The physiological addiction has a simple symptom: If I don't have one or two cups of coffee in the morning, I get a raging headache at noon. A single cup of coffee will stop it in its tracks.

This sensitivity to caffeine has led me to judging the caffeine content of coffee in truck stops, cafes, and restaurants on the road. If I break out in a sweat, I know there was high caffeine; in that single cup of often watery, bitter brew.

I started learning about coffee while a college student, doing my laundry next door to Peet's Coffee in Berkeley. Mr. Peet lectured his customers and eventually trained the people who originally started Starbucks. Ripe coffee beans have less caffeine than green ones. Big coffee companies harvest the beans with machines and as a result, gather unripe with the ripe. Smaller, specialty coffee growers pick their crops by hand so only ripe beans are harvested. Roasting removes caffeine too—so the darker the roast, the less caffeine. If you want more coffee flavor with less buzz, buy darker roasted coffee.

National Geographic had an article which showed on a world map that coffee is grown in a band of countries relatively close to the equator, and it's consumed primarily in countries distant from the equator. In fact the Nordic countries in particular have the highest per capita consumption of coffee in the world. The Finns and Swedes lead the pack so I come by my coffee habit perhaps genetically and definitely culturally.

My first coffee experience was with my grandmother in Clatskanie, coffee with lots of milk. Because my grandparents got raw milk from a neighboring farm, it was probably top milk. The heavy cream, thick as pudding, had been pulled off for butter. The coffee was undoubtedly served with korppua, a traditional Finnish rebaked cardamom bread, looking like crisp toast with cinnamon and sugar on one side.

The role of coffee in Finns' social life gradually seeped into my sensibility. It's served in every social situation, no matter how late at night. Offering coffee is a basic-gesture of hospitality. Once on arriving at the home of an old relative, we didn't hear the offer of coffee for the first twenty minutes and I began scanning the emotional landscape to determine if I had somehow given offense. Eventually the coffee was served and I relaxed, assured that everything was all right.

In most Nordic countries, the formal coffee is still a living tradition—a time to show respect and regard. Besides coffee, at least two baked goods are offered cookies, a coffee cake, or "Danish," plus possibly small amounts of more serious food.

Being a guest at a formal Danish coffee on the island of Fyn was a memorable experience. Joining many others: frequent espressos at The Med on Telegraph, breakfast at Enrico's in North Beach, paper cups from Starbucks while meandering through Pike's Place Market, business meetings over coffee at Victoria's Nephew in Portland, cappuccino in Little Italy, and of course countless cups of coffee with fresh berry pie in our own backyard.

All these coffee memories only reinforce my physical addiction. As I'm counting beans, I'm sensitive to my predicament. The beans have traveled thousands of miles and passed through many hands. Sophisticated transportation, fueled by our dwindling petroleum supply, allow me to satisfy my desire. Big forces are at work. There's money to be made fueling my habit, at all levels: growing, picking, transporting, roasting, retailing. A complex yet fragile system dependent on good weather for good crops, and no disruption of the transportation system—all for my cup of coffee. Lucky I'm not interested in cocaine.

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