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An A+ Borgia from The Divine Cupcake



BORGIALAND

In search of Eugene's perfect espresso drink BY VERN KATZ & PAUL QUALTERE-BURCHER

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

The Borgia is an espresso drink that is somewhat difficult to find but remarkable for its sublime tastes and symbolic evocations. The drink is a mixture of espresso, dark chocolate, steamed milk and orange zest — the perfect blend of comfort and edge, simplicity and depth. All too often coffee is poured like water, drunk without thought and then forgotten. Not so the Borgia, which, though twice as expensive as the common cappuccino or lowly latte, requires careful preparation using high-quality ingredients. Hershey's chocolate stirred into orange syrup does not cut it.

The Borgia can evoke the promise of coming summer romance with a touch of citrus blossoms, or offer refuge from winter's cold with the dark hot chocolate.

Given the preeminence of the coffee culture in our area, we sought to find the best Borgia. The literature does not name the inventor of the modern Borgia. The term "The cup of Borgia" refers to a deadly poison that Lucretia Borgia gave to the enemies of the Vatican in the mid-1500s. The poison was painful and took hours to kill. In contrast, centuries later, the Borgia drink is an ambrosia, a nectar, an epitome of a transformation. How a poison of the Middle Ages evolved to a modern drink is unclear.

As we began to sample Borgias, we learned several lessons. First, the Borgia is barista dependent, not coffee shop dependent. Next, if any one of the drink's ingredients becomes dominant, the Borgia loses its magic. A drink that is too sweet becomes juvenile and monotonously self-indulgent; one that isn't sweet enough allows the bitterness of chocolate and orange zest to dominate. To balance bitter and sweet is the challenge of life, and so it goes with the Borgia.

As for ingredients, orange zest is not merely a topping or an afterthought; it's an essential ingredient of a good Borgia. Navel oranges have minimal aroma and flavor. Orange syrup is no different than a teaspoon of Tang in the morning. The best zest comes from Valencia oranges or, even better, blood oranges. Commercial bulk chocolate and chocolate-flavored syrups are problematic. A good Borgia needs real chocolate — definitely dark and with very little fatty aftertaste. In some Eugene coffee houses, a ganache is used, which is dissolved first in the espresso shot before mixing in any steamed milk or soy. The dissolving of the chocolate is essential. Having chocolate syrup left on the bottom with coffee in the middle and orange zest on top may be a fine way to eat a sundae, but it's not the way to appreciate a Borgia.

THE BEST BORGIA

Vero makes a very good Borgia. It is served in a large bowl-shaped mug and the presentation was lovely. There was zest spread over the top as well as infused into the drink and chocolate powder sprinkled on the whipped cream, which looked pretty. The coffee was excellent, though the whipped cream made the overall drink a bit too sweet. It's more like something from an ice-cream parlor than a coffeehouse. Without the whipped cream, however, the drink was at least a B+. Vero's barista also had the virtue of consistent quality.

Wandering Goat is not your father's coffeehouse, but it has a

great Borgia. At the Goat, it was awarded an A-. The presentation is a bit problematic, but Wandering Goat coffee is superb and the sweetness is exactly what it should be. Its Borgia is served in a mug with foam topping. The zest was fresh and mixed into the drink, which is good.

Full City on Pearl makes an excellent Borgia. It uses ganache, and its zest is only from Valencia oranges, as the barista explained to us as well as an apprentice barista she was instructing. She carefully dissolved the ganache and showed her apprentice the consistency needed before the rest of the drink was developed. The taste was excellent and the Full City blend went well with the orange zest. The drink emphasized flavor over style, which is not bad, but we could only give them an A, not an A+. (Full City did ask me whether to use whipped cream, and when we said "no whip," the barista knowingly said "of course." She understood that that was the aficionado's preference.)

Interestingly, we found the very best Borgia in town at Crema, a small coffee shop at RiverBend hospital. It is an inauspicious coffeehouse at the junction of the hospital and the office buildings. The head barista has studied coffee for several years and taught us much. Crema uses an excellent coffee — a blend from Stumptown — and it keeps Valencia oranges just for making Borgias. Crema uses syrup, but it's a special dark chocolate syrup created just for the drink. We gave Crema an A+.

One of the best Borgias in town was at Metropal on Willamette, and it was awarded an A as well. The chocolate was dissolved perfectly into the coffee, followed by the rest of the espresso and foam. The zest was fresh and from Valencias.

Sweet Life received mixed reviews, and this was due to barista skills. One of our writers felt that the Sweet Life Borgia was too sweet — hot chocolate with an orange aftertaste. To be fair, the drink was not made by their head barista, and received a B. The presentation was disappointing and the flavor lacking. Because Sweet Life has such a good reputation for other gifts to the community we decided to try it again. We were lucky enough to have the head barista make us a Borgia, and she achieved perfection. The zest, the chocolate, the coffee: All were mixed to perfection. The bakery received an A+ for this presentation, although it was a tiny bit on the sweet side. Overall, Sweet Life is worth trying.

At the Divine Cupcake the difference a barista makes became clear. Our first Borgia was lackluster, too sweet with no orange taste or zest. But in speaking to the owners we discovered that it had been made by a fill-in for the head barista. We returned to give the Cupcake another chance to redeem the shop and were served one of the best Borgias in town. It had a whip cream top, which usually is pedestrian — it makes the drink too sweet. But the head barista made a perfect whip Borgia: balanced flavors, not too sweet, light yet flavorful.

The coffee culture in the Northwest has grown to be emblematic of our region, and the Borgia is one of the best coffee beverages. After all, if one works in a coffeehouse, then one should try to make the perfect drink. What better drink to achieve perfection than the Borgia, the Mt. Everest of coffee drinks? ■