

Caffeinate With Confidence

You can pull off a barista-grade pour-over at home

BY RACHEL WHARTON

AS YOU READ THIS, baristas across the U.S.A. are hunched over “pour-over bars,” fastidiously drizzling water into ordinary coffee filter cones—and selling the results for \$4 a pop. I’ll admit that a pour-over coffee tastes remarkably light, bright, pure and delicious. Still, \$4? Surely I can do the same thing at home. Can’t I just boil and pour?

The answer, I learned in a two-hour class at Counter Culture Coffee’s Manhattan training lab, is yes and no. Last month the Durham, N.C.-based coffee roasting company launched its first pour-over class for the public; they’ll roll it out in locations including Durham, Boston, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Asheville, N.C., in July. My class was taught by regional training rep Erin Meister. Beyond mastering this particular technique, the ultimate goal, Ms. Meister told her students—a former barista, a coffee enthusiast visiting from Korea, two guys killing time before a baby shower and me—was to learn “the principles of how coffee is brewed.”

After five years in training and quality control at Counter Culture, Ms. Meister is as capable of schooling you on who invented the paper filter (“a very fastidious German housewife

named Melitta Benz”) as brewing science. About 30% of a coffee bean is extractable in water, she told us, but only 18 to 22% of that tastes good. “Unfortunately,” she added, “you can’t whisper to the coffee beans and say, ‘Only let me have the good stuff.’” Instead, you must master the proper grind, the right ratio of water to grounds and the optimum brew time.

At least one of those elements is fairly established for American palates: 1.75 grams of coffee for every 28 grams of water. Ms. Meister finds it easiest to keep track of how much water she’s adding with a digital scale: Set the cone filter on the cup, and the cup on the scale, then pour away. If you don’t have a scale, you can measure out your water before you pour. Just work quickly and use a heat-proof vessel, Ms. Meister recommended, so your water temperature doesn’t drop dramatically.

Before we were allowed to try, we brewed a few cups incorrectly on purpose—a revelatory exercise. Under-extracted, the coffee was sour; over-extracted, it was bitter. Just right, it was balanced and sweet. Ms. Meister told us the beans and water should mingle for no fewer than three minutes and no more than four.

With a pour-over, the grounds are doused in stages, rather than left to



Erin Meister of Counter Culture Coffee serves up an impeccable pour-over.

soak as in a French press. That’s partially why a pour-over is lighter: The extraction is gentler. Plus, the paper filter captures particles and oil.

In class, we tried to nail Ms. Meister’s technique (detailed below), which requires watching a timer and a scale while adding 50 grams of water at a time. It felt like being given a written guide on how to drive a stick shift—one that covers not only the basics of engaging the clutch, but the precise num-

ber of grams of gas to give the engine at exactly what time.

At home, though, I fell into my normal kitchen routine—ignore all instruction and do what feels right. I did follow the prescribed pour-and-drip-and-repeat method, but at my own pace, until I finally achieved 500 grams of coffee in four minutes. When I checked in with Ms. Meister a few days later, she approved. “The key,” she said, “is to find your own groove.”

HOW TO: BREW IT LIKE A PRO



1. Boil the water. You don’t need to wait for the water to cool after it comes to a boil, as many baristas believe. As long as it’s not at a rolling boil, the water should cool down enough by the time you’re pouring it so that it won’t over-extract the beans and make a bitter cup.



2. Measure and grind beans. You want medium-fine grounds, like coarse sand. The rule is 1.75 grams of coffee per 1 ounce (28 grams) of water. For a 16-ounce cup, Ms. Meister uses 30 grams of whole beans to 500 grams of water (or 4 heaping tablespoons of coffee to 2¼ cups of water).



3. Prepare the filter. Fold so it fits snugly in the cone by creating the bottom pleat in one direction, and the perforated side pleat in the other. Once it is in the cone, wet the filter gently, then add the grounds. Place the cone on a jar or mug large enough to hold at least 20 ounces.



4. Bloom your beans. Once the water boils, gently pour in just enough water to wet the grounds. Start your timer. The grounds will rise, or bloom, as they emit carbon dioxide—this helps them absorb water. Wait 35 seconds, or until coffee begins to drip from the cone, before pouring in more water.



5. Brew the coffee. Keeping an eye on the timer, slowly and evenly pour water over the grounds to reach 2 inches from the top of the filter. Once the water subsides by 1 inch, add more. Repeat until you’ve added all the water—ideally, within 4 minutes. When the dripping slows, the coffee is ready.