

gold trimmings at

*black velvet*

Sydney coffee vendors are on notice: the sisters behind Velluto Nero are leaving the prize pool bare with their inimitable coffee. **Sally Hammond** reports from coffee heaven

I came for the triple-choc brownie. Who wouldn't? Someone told me it was too good to be true. As I tasted it, savouring its rich decadence and its melting texture I had to agree: yes, surely, it was.

That wasn't all I had heard about Velluto Nero. The name means "black velvet" in Italian, and aptly describes the lush brews that are winning the tiny cafe a steady stream of contented caffeine aficionados.

That's not all Velluto Nero is winning. The business won the Champion Espresso title at the Sydney Royal Fine Food Show this year, where the judges heaped accolades on the heads of the newbie roasters (Velluto Nero opened in September 2007).

The accolades prove the three owners – Aileen, Gina and Vicky Young – can roast and blend.

But in the fiercely-competitive, café-cultured Sydney CBD, just how does this venture go about sourcing and satisfying new clientele?

**Fresh eyes**

The individuals behind Velluto Nero were not raised in the coffee trade; they did not cut their teeth on coffee beans under the counter of their parents' cafe.

New Zealand-born Aileen Young was involved in the fashion industry before coming to Australia. Her love of fashion is reflected in the name of the business and its promise of coffee couture. Aileen's sisters Gina and Vicky also left corporate careers to pursue adventures in coffee.

Aileen says the three sisters spoke about building a business for years.

"But we didn't really take it seriously until two years before we opened," she says. All three work full-time on the business.

"We've tried to create a 'weekend coffee escape' with a modern, contemporary approach."

Modestly, Aileen says much of the recent success (the awards and the exposure) was the result of luck. One might surmise that a lot of effort, passion and dedication from the owners also played an important role in securing the success.

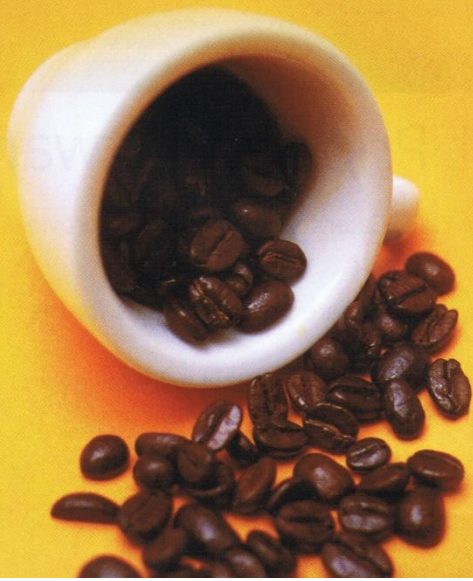
"It's been unexpected, but we appreciate it so much," Aileen says. "It might be hard to keep up the momentum but we're focusing on maintaining quality, being innovative and developing new blends.

"We're focusing on staying true to our brand."

If you count the gleaming potbellied roaster at the front of the café, you could say there are four "women" involved in Velluto Nero.

Bella is her name: buxom and gleaming black, she has proved time and again her importance to the café, calling caffeine-deprived workers and shoppers into the store with her coffee aromas. The massive coffee roaster is cleverly positioned right at the doorway, metres from the passing trade.

A gimmick? Yes, and no. It's certainly a point of difference, and it's rare to have a roaster right inside a café. Bella is the only in-store roaster you'll find in the heart of Sydney.

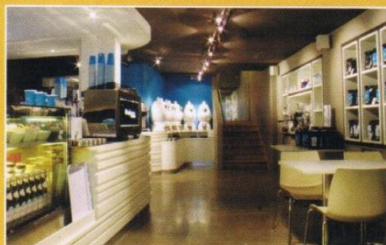


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### The right blend

The three sisters spent countless hours profiling, developing and cupping for their winning coffee blend "Designer Blend - Espresso".

Vicky, the resident coffee roaster, says the winning formula uses the highest quality sustainable Arabica coffee beans.

"It means cupping and drinking a lot of coffee," she says.

The sisters won't launch a blend unless all three agree on it.

"We've set some standards for ourselves which we make sure we meet," Aileen says. "We've had a lot of people enquire about wholesale and franchise opportunities. But our strategy is to get the formula right."

Aileen says the focus right now is on making sure the store, the systems, the blends and the retail coffee sales systems are bedded down before Velluto Nero considers expanding.

"We don't want to move to quickly," Aileen says.

### From the ground up

The coffee for sale in the café is prepared by baristas, using only freshly roasted Velluto Nero coffee beans at their peak. Each cup is ground-on-demand to optimise the flavour extraction.

The baristas use Riverina Milk and Bonsoy Soy Milk. Both premium products have been blind taste-tested.

The café menu includes breakfast until a very civilised 11am, gourmet sandwiches, salads, savouries and yummy companions to those brownies in the display counter.

Once customers are recharged with the coffee, they're open to be seduced by the different blends and grinds at the back of the shop. The white porcelain dispensers, which the sisters call "coffee silos", hold teas and coffees for customers to take home. Velluto Nero doubles as a retail outlet for coffee-related products, homeware, specialty loose-leaf teas and Belgian hot chocolates.

The Velluto Nero team also offers an online coffee shop, selling nine blends of coffee, 11 blends of tea, and lines in chocolate, equipment and homeware.

The company supports sustainability practices when acquiring its green beans, including certified RFA lines available as single origins.

This writer recommends you use the online facility if time or distance prevents you from physically getting to the shop. But Sydney-siders and visitors need to see for themselves what's going on here. If those brownies or even a Callebaut Belgian hot chocolate aren't incentive enough, a sample cup of Australia's best espresso (and that's official) surely is. ☞

### Accolades for Velluto Nero

Since opening in September 2007, Velluto Nero has won a swag of awards and mentions.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Living* liftout in April praised Velluto Nero, judging its short black and cappuccino as the best of 10 Sydney cafés reviewed.

And a victor's placing at the tenth annual Sydney Royal Coffee Competition confirmed Velluto Nero had attained its dream in record time.

In this prestigious event over 200 coffees from around Australia were blind-tasted and judged in six classes by a panel of 15.

In the 10 years since the competition was launched only a small number of Gold Medals have been awarded. This year the only gold went to Velluto Nero for its Designer Blend - Espresso, which made it the automatic Champion Espresso as well, an even rarer award!

We should have seen it coming. Just seven weeks after its launch, Velluto Nero won a bronze medal in the prestigious 2007 Equal Golden Bean Awards for coffee roasting.