

Good Living

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THE COFFEE ISSUE

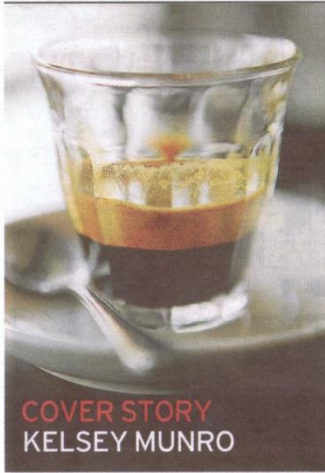
AROMA THERAPY

Sydney's best brews

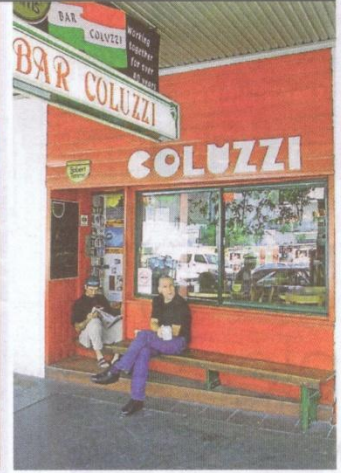
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COVER STORY
KELSEY MUNRO



I've bean to paradise

... not to mention hell and back, in the search for Sydney's best coffee.

Guatemalans tend to be sweet. Colombians? Nutty. Africans are known for their potent acidity and aroma. Indonesians are generally earthy and heavy. Not the people or football teams – the coffee beans. This is the sort of thing you learn from Paul Mannassis, a boutique roaster who has bravely accepted the challenge of finding Sydney's best coffee.

There are, no doubt, as many great coffee spots in this city as opinionated coffee drinkers. In an effort to inject some science into the hunt, Good Living invited Mannassis, the Royal Agricultural Society's espresso judge, to rate a selection of Sydney's short blacks. His customer Dorothy Mavrikos – a keen amateur connoisseur with a four-cup-a-day habit and a sophisticated coffee machine at home – will judge cappuccinos.

Coffee judges look for a combination of desirable characteristics in their coffee. "It's got to have a nice aroma ... integrity and body, a good mouth feel and, more importantly, have a nice lengthy texture towards the end," Mannassis says. "A lot of people just want a big hit – that's great but you need the quality, too ... it's more in the roast but in the end it's human handling that really makes it or breaks it."

A coffee judge will usually spit rather than swallow – with more than 200 coffee exhibitors at the Easter Show this year, it's probably an OH&S requirement. Mannassis has been in the business for 21 years as a manufacturer and roasts beans in a Marrickville warehouse under his own

brand, Mocha Coffee. He also trains baristas in the proper use of Elektra coffee machines and readily admits espresso judges and the average drinker may be looking for different things in their perfect coffee.

"Generally, [industry people] like the texture and the sharpness," he says, "but as you're starting to drink it, you tend to like a heavy, smooth, neutral coffee." Meaning not as bitter? "You can burn coffee, carbonise it that's bitter." But also a very light roast is quite acidic – which people can find bitter, too. It's how the customer interprets it."

Espresso Galleria 84 Ramsay Street, Haberfield

In a charming shopping strip filled with authentic Italian food, you'd expect to find a specialty coffee spot such as this. The small, no-frills cafe has three tables out front and a handful more inside, where it sells custom roasts as well as cups of coffee.

The house blend arrives in chunky white ceramic cups. "Lovely," Mavrikos says of her cappuccino. "You can really taste the coffee, it's got beautiful body and it's very smooth." Mannassis likes his espresso, too. "Very full-bodied, it's not been spilt by over-roasting ... It is not as nutty or sweet as I would prefer but it's smooth and thick."

Gloria Jeans Kiosk 4, Ashfield Mall, 260a Liverpool Road, Ashfield

Coffee snobs might roll their eyes but *someone* is buying Gloria Jeans. Since its first

Australian store opened in late 1996, the company has opened 187 stores in NSW alone. We order at the counter and a staff member brings the coffees to the table in paper cups, scooping a heap of sugar packets and stirrers off the tray with one hand.

"I could be dying for a coffee and still wouldn't drink this," Mannassis says, adding that the beans are over-roasted so the coffee is carbonised. It has a distinct burnt smell. Mavrikos is also underwhelmed by her cappuccino. "The milk's burnt," she says. "It's far too hot ... you can't taste the coffee."

Trovatino Cafe 268 Great North Road, Wareemba

Trovatino is gorgeous: a spectacular gelato bar and big fresh fruit and veg section. It uses venerable Italian brand Caffe Molinari, yet Mavrikos's cappuccino is "weak, quite bland ... it fades away quite quickly".

Australia's love affair with coffee began with Italian roasts shipped across the world but has since diversified with the rise of the local boutique roaster, who can provide fresher coffee. That's the problem here, Mannassis says of his short black. "It's not very fresh – it was roasted too long ago ... but you really can't compare imported coffee with fresh."

Campos Coffee 193 Missenden Road, Newtown

This buzzy Newtown institution is the be-all and end-all for many coffee fans. Handsome baristas churn out the goods in chocolate-

brown ceramic cups for a queue of caffeine junkies. It smells wonderful and looks great but when we visit our judges aren't thrilled. "It has a good hit, good finish but there's not much in the middle," Mannassis says. Compared with her most recent Campos coffee, Mavrikos doesn't like her cappuccino. "It's very bitter, acidic," she says.

The difference could be down to the barista who made it but Mannassis says acidity is a characteristic of many quality African beans. "It gives you that hit but it's very acidic, as opposed to [the Galleria coffee] which was the hit with an earthiness. The ideal is somewhere in between."

Single Origin Roaster 60 Reservoir Street, Surry Hills

With square wooden tables and minimum fuss decor, this is a place where the focus is firmly on the coffee (the roaster is in one corner) and friendly service. It's the last stop of the day – five coffees down already – yet Mavrikos loves her cappuccino.

"It's quite mellow," she says approvingly. "Not sharp, not acidic, the perfect temperature. There's a lovely sweetness in the coffee." Mannassis likens the house blend to Galleria's: "It still has that heaviness, a big hit, but with a little more acid – not as much as Campos. Nice."

Clodeli Fine Foods 1/210 Clovelly Road, Randwick

The next morning our first stop is the sun-filled Clodeli, popular with young mums. The coffee is from Rosebery roaster Allpress. It's good news all round.

Mavrikos's cappuccino has "a lovely potency, lovely flavour to it. It's not too milky, you can really taste the coffee." Mannassis's "good" short black has "got the body, a good texture". He has one slight reservation. "Everyone uses this heavier style because it works best with milk," he says. "But if you get the roasting right, you

Caffeine culture ... (from far left) short black at Espresso Galleria; staff at Velluto Nero; customers relax at Bar Coluzzi; making coffee at Clodell Fine Foods. Photos: Marco Del Grande and Quentin Jones

can have an espresso with flavour and integrity but also a soft sweetness. I think cafes will eventually start using two blends – one for white and one for black.”

Bar Coluzzi

322 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst
The veteran Bar Coluzzi, which opened in the 1950s, has probably introduced more Sydneysiders to espressos than anywhere else. Still in the same tiny atmosphere-packed spot, with stools clustered on the footpath, Coluzzi is always busy with locals who swear by their Robert Timms espressos.

The short black has “a good smell and body. It’s nice but not great,” Mannassis says. “They could back off a tiny bit in the roast, it’s slightly caramelised but not bad for a commercial grade roaster.” Mavrikos’s cappuccino has a thick crust of chocolate – “far too much”, she says. Of the coffee: “It’s a bit too hot but it’s fine, drinkable.” Is the cafe resting on its laurels? Mannassis says no. “It’s historic, it’s buzzy. People come.”

Fratelli Paradiso

12-16 Challis Avenue, Potts Point
With wood panelling so dark it’s night-like inside, this Italian restaurant has a nice Melbourne feel. Staff are chalking up the menu on the blackboard wall as we arrive. Their coffee is Vittoria and it’s pretty good. “It’s got good body, texture – it does its job,” Mannassis says. Mavrikos’s coffee is “soothing, enjoyable, a lovely temperature”.

Mannassis, himself a small-scale roaster, says big commercial roasters such as Robert Timms or Vittoria tend to take the roast a bit further. It levels off the acid but makes the coffee more caramelised. “Smaller roasts have more vibrant flavours,” he says.

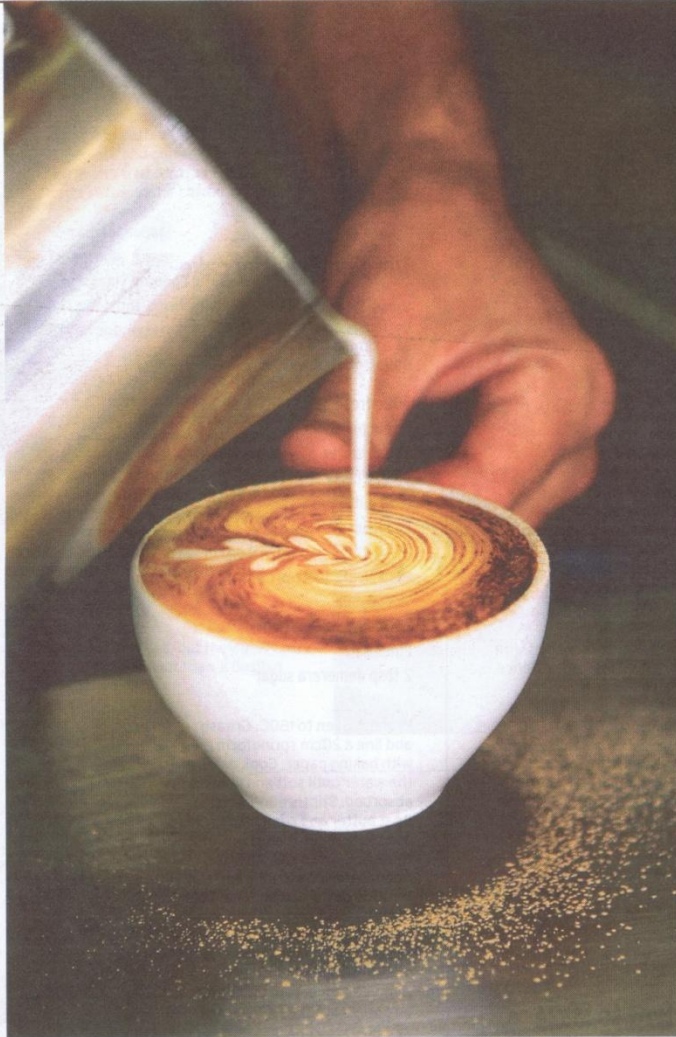
Barefoot Cafe

47a Sydney Road, Manly
A tiled shopfront with a big open window, the hip, breezy Barefoot Cafe sits oddly with the surrounding tourist tack. Belgian waffles with chocolate are the only food on the menu and the coffee is organic fair trade from Toby’s Estate. A beautiful wooden counter and squat stools are the only furniture.

Unusually, Mannassis’s short black is “full bodied but too short, if anything”. A more common sin is over-lengthening, as short blacks should be 30 millilitres. He feels the roast is a bit overdone, too. The cappuccino has “a thick full body, it’s fine, drinkable. But I wouldn’t crave it,” Mavrikos says.

Atomic Espresso

148 Wycombe Road, Neutral Bay
Only wide enough for a slender barista to squeeze past the single line of tables, Atomic is a commuters’ favourite that’s



built for speed, not lingering. In fact, Mannassis’s espresso pours in only a few seconds, to his consternation.

“It’s fresh ground but the grind is too coarse,” he says. “That’s why it comes through so quickly and the coffee doesn’t get enough time to brew. It’s too watery.”

The cappuccino doesn’t fare much better. “It’s bitter ... and has a burnt taste,” Mavrikos says. “I couldn’t drink it.” The coffee is Toby’s Estate but while Mannassis says the barista “had the right amount of liquor in the cup” the grind was “shocking”.

Starbucks

201 Elizabeth Street, city
This glass temple to global franchising sits

in a prime position opposite Hyde Park. The service is bright and friendly, Sinatra is on the speakers and fair trade messages decorate the walls. The coffee comes in vast paper cups. Our judges are not happy.

“It’s a fully automatic machine,” Mannassis says, “which grinds, doses and brews the coffee. It’s supposed to eliminate human error and keep the coffee fresh but you need a skilled operator to extract a good espresso.” The coffee tastes carbonised. Mavrikos hates her cappuccino. “All I’m tasting is milk,” she says, poking the foam in her 350ml (tall) cup (non-Starbucks standard cups are typically 220ml). “Starbucks buy really good beans,” Mannassis says, “but they don’t roast them properly.”

Spill the beans

It’s a difficult call ... to find Sydney’s best coffee. We know many readers will argue about our choice of venues and, with a couple of exceptions, we aimed to review lesser-known places, enlisting two experts to put the coffees through their paces. But, in a city so obsessed with its daily grind, Good Living’s selection could never be definitive. So we ask our readers to share their wisdom: see our blog and reveal your caffeine heaven at smh.com.au/goodliving.



FINAL VERDICT

SHORT BLACK

- 1 Velluto Nero Coffee Couture
- 2 Single Origin Roaster
- 3 Clodell Fine Foods and Espresso Galleria
- 4 Campos Coffee
- 5 Fratelli Paradiso
- 6 Bar Coluzzi
- 7 Barefoot Cafe
- 8 Trovatino Cafe
- 9 Atomic Espresso
- 10 Gloria Jeans and Starbucks

CAPPUCINO

- 1 Velluto Nero Coffee Couture
- 2 Clodell Fine Foods
- 3 Espresso Galleria
- 4 Single Origin Roaster
- 5 Barefoot Cafe
- 6 Fratelli Paradiso
- 7 Bar Coluzzi
- 8 Campos Coffee
- 9 Trovatino Cafe
- 10 Atomic Espresso
- 11 Gloria Jeans and Starbucks

Velluto Nero Coffee Couture

3/259 Clarence Street, city
Velluto Nero is a long, skinny, cold-looking cafe with a roaster in the doorway and an array of porcelain bean dispensers at the back. What it lacks in atmosphere it makes up for in coffee.

“This is the one. Top of the list,” Mannassis says. He approves of the colour, aroma and crema of his short black. “It’s got some acid but not too much, a nice spicy sweet aroma, very nice lengthy texture.”

Mavrikos, too, is happy. “This is so smooth, full bodied, full flavoured ... there’s a sweetness to the coffee, no bitterness. Superb. I could drink another one right now.”