



Coffee Connections

An afternoon of coffee appreciation with a coffee expert and a mixologist brings home the point that, much like wine, preparing and enjoying a superior cup of coffee is no simple matter.

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(LEFT) RADKA SLOVACKOVA AND GIUSEPPE VACCARINI



ORDINARILY, ONE NEEDS TO BE A PROFESSIONAL SOMMELIER

or a highly regarded chef—and be willing to travel to Milan—to get a one-on-one lesson on coffee appreciation from Giuseppe Vaccarini, a much decorated wine and food expert with a string of accomplishments to his name. But during his recent visit to Singapore to launch the *Nespresso Coffee Codex*, which he co-authored, in Asia, the amiable former Best Sommelier in the World Champion generously offered *Wine & Dine* an exclusive tutored session on the art of tasting coffee and its harmonization. Suffice to say, I, albeit very much a novice coffee drinker, leapt to the opportunity.

Born in Miradolo Terme, a small village in the province of Pavia, Italy, Vaccarini has been a professional sommelier for 38 years. In his long and prestigious career, the winner of the ‘Best Sommelier of the World’ competition in 1978 has headed several restaurant groups in Italy, served as a jury for many national and international sommelier competitions and has authored numerous publications. He was the former President of the Association of Italian Sommeliers and also served as the President, and then Managing Director, of the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale. Vaccarini currently consults for many important F&B businesses in Italy and also teaches specialized courses at sommelier schools and at the University Bocconi e della Cattolica of Milan.

Not contented to sit on his laurels, the distinguished wine expert ventured into “unchartered waters” to create a “bible” to help sommeliers and coffee lovers appreciate the sensorial facets of different types of coffee one year ago. An initiative by the Swiss

premium coffee machine maker, Nespresso, the *Coffee Codex* “was the most challenging book for me to write as I didn’t know much about coffee at that time and it was something new,” says Vaccarini. But the 58-year-old “expert of taste” is hardly one to be daunted by new challenges and obstacles. Applying his tenacity, perspicuity in sensorial analysis and in-depth knowledge of all the products that are brought to a table, including coffee—qualities which undoubtedly led to his winning the sommelier championship—Vaccarini quickly understood that coffee appreciation has much in common with wine appreciation.

IT IS ABOUT THE “CREMA”

My lesson starts with observing the elegant Nespresso coffee machine in action. After pressing a button I watch, fascinated, how the coffee slowly fills the glass. The cream with strength of an avalanche powerfully overwhelms the liquid and then disappears slowly in the thick layer of creamy froth on the surface. After the genesis of this aromatic fluid is completed I take my cup and join my teacher.

Vaccarini takes me step by step through the process of evaluating the taste of coffee and the right approach to appreciate coffee’s aromas. “First, you have to evaluate the colour”, he says as we begin the sensory analysis. It seems to me a bit like blind wine tasting but Vacarini adds: “All the aromas are in the ‘crema.’” He uses the Italian word as he struggles to find an English term to describe it correctly. However, I must agree in this case it fits better for the creamy layer of the foam covering the top of correctly prepared espresso like a soft

blanket. He continues: “You look for consistency in colour and there cannot be any big bubbles, it must be uniform. Then you look at the thickness of the crema.” This is already slightly different from wine as there is no “crema” on its surface. We use a spoon to analyse it as we move the cream near to the nose to smell more aromas. While I am getting so fully immersed in the smelling my nose dives into the foam and scoops it on the tip. Vaccarini smiles advising that I do not need to rush as “the scents do not run out so quickly.” My mind goes back to a wine tasting. First you smell and then you swirl the wine around the glass so the more intense and different aromas are released after the contact with air. The first sample, a refreshing *Cosi* which is a blend of East African, Central and South American Arabicas, has a thick cream and light colour disclosing the length of the roasting. The darker the colour, the longer the coffee was roasted.

DEFINING AROMAS

Then we move on to the nose. This reminds me even more of a wine tasting. As with good wine you can immediately smell the intensity. *Cosi* is quite intense, perhaps, even a little too intense. Another important aspect is finesse, how elegant is the aroma. The greater the elegance, the better the quality. I look for the concrete aromas in the coffee. Dipping my nose into the cup together with Vaccarini I cannot find exact words to describe it and he helps me by saying, “This one is flowery, some jasmine and citrus.” I struggle as I do not smell any citrus. He adds in ginger and little bit of cereal. Finally, my nose agrees. I wonder if coffee aromas evolve as they get a breath of oxygen as is common for older wines, but Vaccarini quickly dismisses the notion. “You should not leave the coffee standing for too long as the aroma disappears,” he says.

The overall trick of finding out the provenance of the coffee lies in three different aromas. Floral scents are African; coffee from South America has hints of cereals and Indian coffee is spicy and very intense.

Next step is the taste itself. We evaluate body—texture, smoothness and balance between acidity and bitterness. Exactly like with wine. *Cosi* has a round body, is smooth and even though there is a little bit more bitterness and the acidity is slightly lower, this coffee is still balanced according to the expert. Finally, the length of the taste in the mouth after swallowing wraps up the sensory experience. *Cosi* has quite a long finish but not too long.

In an ideal case one can give ratings to a coffee based on a coffee tasting scorecard. The total score is up to 100. Getting over 70 points means that it is a very good coffee. Our first cup scored 72, much to our satisfaction. Vaccarini sums it up, “You try to achieve high balance between bitterness and acidity, the harmony of flavours.”



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

The second coffee, the delightful *Volutto* which is a blend of Brazilian and Colombian Arabicas, has a thick “crema”, consistent colour but it is a bit darker so it was roasted longer. Also the coffee itself is darker—more towards black. The smell is completely different than the first one. Dried fruit, cereal (now I know it is from South America) and chocolate. It has a very fine and elegant body. The acidity is higher but the harmony is perfect. Scoring a little higher, 74 points, it is a slightly better coffee. Good acidity makes it ideal for the afternoons or before food to stimulate your appetite.

The last coffee, an Indian roast, is darker than the previous two. It was roasted quickly though to balance its strong aroma. The darkness comes from its power. Spicy and chocolatey aromas reveal its Indian roots. Very round in your mouth, it has a full body and good acidity but the bitterness is higher.

Arabica beans are blended with a bit of Robusta to bring more roundness to this *Indriya*. Vaccarini says, “This coffee, you should drink after a meal. You can match it with whisky and with stronger chocolate.” It is an ideal digestif to finish a rich meal.

MIXING IT UP

Vaccarini is a purist, preferring to relish his coffee neat, perhaps with water or at most with a bite of chocolate, dessert and other delicacies. Mixologists, on the other hand, have plenty of ideas on blending other alcoholic or non-alcoholic liquids with coffee. One of them is British-born Richard Gillam, who recently arrived in Singapore as the Beverage Operations Manager for Equinox, Swissôtel The Stamford, gives me some tips for interesting coffee creations.

He begins by telling me that “it is quite hard to use coffee in cocktails”. I think of giving up then and there and get back to my milky cappuccino. However, the multi-award-winning mixologist, who has just swept up another accolade as the best mixologist in the Singapore leg of the Diageo World Class bartending championships and represented the country in the world finals in Athens, continues, “But that is what makes it so interesting! Bartenders like a challenge and you can have a lots of fun with it.” Overall, “It is more complex but easier.” Gillam is openly admits, “Bartenders hate it when people are ordering out of the menu, it is boring. When the guests are more demanding, they will get much better drinks.” Now we know the secret—to please a bartender, use your imagination and tell him what you like and he is going to make you happy.

Gillam guides me on making a classy Ristretto Martini. The first step is to make the coffee; press the button and ristretto is ready. I



RICHARD GILLAM WATCHING OVER HIS APPRENTICE

pour it hot into the shaker. Measuring the liquids precisely is the next step as I add a dose of vodka, half of Galliano Ristretto and the same amount of fresh vanilla sugar syrup.

While I am flexing my muscles to get enough strength for shaking my first coffee cocktail, Gillam shows me how to hold the bottle and “splash” the chocolatey tasting ingredient (The Bitter Truth Xocolatl Mole Bitters) into the shaker. Taking his word seriously I grab the bottle and “splash” a bit into the shaker. Of course, most of the liquid ends elsewhere and I am embarrassed of being so messy. How do mixologists do it? Making a cocktail looks very precise and it is quite energetic as well as it always seems to me they are ‘dancing’ behind the bar. Surely, I did not look “hot” splashing drinks around. The expert mixologist gives me a serious look, unusual for this madcapper, and says, “Mixing drinks is all about the style,” wrapping my fingers around the lid of the shaker, “and about practice.”

Another trick is to “add as much as ice as you can.” This is not so much to cheat a guest by adding less of the drink, but the ice actually makes the bubbles created during shaking stick to

it so that when you pour a drink through a strainer, it moves elegantly downwards and there are no inconsistencies in the glass, and the cocktail looks perfect.

When coffee is used in cocktails often the negative aspects of it, such as bitterness, are enhanced. That is why you need a good quality coffee to start with. Incidentally, Gillam has been selected to attend the Nespresso Sommelier Programme in Switzerland this year (together with Jan Stroop of Saint Pierre restaurant).

A perfect example of matching the right coffee with other drinks is the second cocktail a non-alcoholic Iced Orange Coffee where decaf coffee lungo is mixed with orange juice. Lungo coffee requires more water and the coffee type should not be very intense so the

bitterness of the orange juice does not fight with the strong coffee. This refreshing drink is crowned with one dash The Bitter Truth Orange Bitters which I “splash”, this time in style, directly into the shaker. A vigorous shake and, voila, my perfect summer cocktail lands in a tall frappe glass.

From the wide array of alcoholic beverages Gillam recommends using cachaca, Galliano, gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whisky or cognac which is now very popular to mix with coffee. **wd**



RISTRETTO MARTINI

INGREDIENTS

20ml	Nespresso Ristretto
35ml	Russian Standard vodka
15ml	Galliano ristretto liqueur
15ml	Fresh vanilla sugar syrup
1 dash	The Bitter Truth xocolatl mole bitters

METHOD

Place all ingredients in a shaker except the bitters. Fill with ice and shake hard to create a nice froth inside the shaker. Strain into a martini glass. Dash bitters on top to finish and swirl through the froth.

VANILLA SYRUP

1	Fresh vanilla pod
1kg	White sugar
500ml	Hot water

METHOD

Slice the vanilla pod lengthways and scrape seeds into a large (1 litre) heat resistant container or jug. Put the remains of the pod in as well. Add the sugar and mix the seeds in well. Put in the hot water and stir until sugar is completely dissolved. Leave to cool, bottle and keep refrigerated. Kept cool, this will last for at least two weeks. If you wish to make less, keep the 2:1 ratio of sugar-to-water but still use one whole vanilla pod.



ICED ORANGE COFFEE

INGREDIENTS

110ml	Nespresso Decaffeinato Lungo
15ml	Fresh orange juice (strained)
1 dash	The Bitter Truth Orange Bitters

METHOD

Add all ingredients to a shaker. Fill with ice and shake hard. Strain into an ice filled latte or long frappe glass.

RECIPES BY **RICHARD GILLAM**,
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