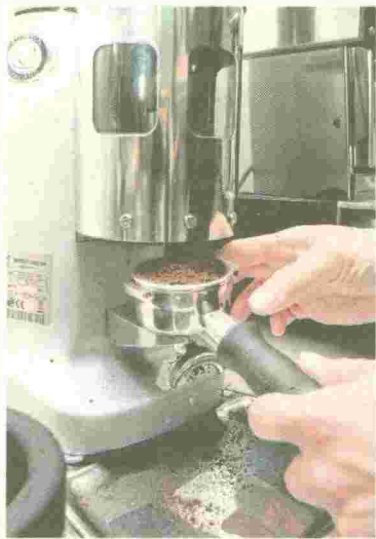


LIFE&TIMES **LIVING**

# For that perfect cuppa

A state-of-the-art coffee machine, the best beans and the barista's skill guarantee you an excellent beverage, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



The coffee-making process is a *delicate* art.



THE moment you step into the room, the chocolaty and caramel aroma of freshly ground coffee assails you, the rain and overcast sky outside forgotten.

After a warm welcome from Evelyn Lee, 34, the marketing manager of Classic Fine Foods, she asks: "Would you like a cup of coffee?" Aware that the company supplies premium coffee beans to Espressoamente illy cafes, you say "yes".

Jacques Cosset, 52, the company's managing director, smiles for he already knows what urban Malaysians are fast learning: coffee drinks, be they cappuccino, latte or espresso, made using Illy coffee beans are bound to be perfect.

Cosset explains that the basis of all coffee drinks is espresso. As such, mastering the precise science of making this drink will result in

## The best espresso

THE formula for 25 millilitres of perfect espresso:  
7g freshly ground coffee  
Water temperature at 90°C  
Extraction pressure at 9 atmosphere  
Percolation time of 25 seconds

syrupe and produces crema (the thick layer of dark, rust-coloured foam on top of the espresso).

"It is the caramelised sugars released from the coffee when making espresso," he says.

Today, the heritage of making the

perfect espresso has three parts: espresso coffee machines, coffee beans and a barista's skill.

The first espresso machine was invented in 1901 by an Italian, Bezzera. In 1935, Francesco Illy (founder of Illycaffè) invented an espresso machine and called it Illetta (a combination of his name and that of his wife's). This machine succeeded in extracting crema, but it was a cumbersome contraption. Neverthe-

less, the benchmark was set and all future machines improved on this one.

Cosset says that, today, the company that produces the best espresso machines is La Marzocco.

"This company started in 1927, but to this day, it will still make only a restricted number of units a year. It will not mass produce to maintain the quality of its work.

"And, every machine is handmade. There are no robots that weld the machines. If you go to their factory, it's like going to an old garage. Sometimes,

Bambi (the founder's son) will come to the workshop to guide his workers on how to make the machine. His philosophy is that anyone can learn a technique.

But, you can only develop passion if you are dedicated and have pride and respect in your work."

## Cups and saucers

ABOUT 20 years ago, the people at Illycaffè wanted a person to experience the impact on all his five senses when drinking coffee. So, they embarked on a project to create coffee cups and saucers that were, in themselves, works of art.

Since then, each year, Illycaffè works with artists and top designers to come up with a collection of limited edition, specially designed espresso cups and saucers.

For the Anish Kapoor Espresso Cups collection, the designer Anish Kapoor asked the question, "What do I see when I look into a hole?" He played with a cup and subverted its use: by placing the platinum saucer with the hole in the centre on the top, the flickering reflections became form and touched on themes such as doubt, ambivalence, error, mystery, surprise and the desire to understand.

The collection designed by Tobias Rehberger, one of Germany's most renowned contemporary artists, treats the white surface of the cup and saucer as a blank canvas, with striking optical effects and patterns.

Francesco Clemente, one of Italy's most renowned contemporary artists, designed the Clemente Collection. The design is bold and beautiful, highlighting his trademark use of colour depicting explosions of energy resulting in a visual impact that intrigues and inspires.

## Workshops

UNIVERSITA Del Caffè Della Malesia, the brainchild of Illycaffè, offers courses and workshops to increase and disseminate the coffee culture in Malaysia with a training school that offers a complete theoretical and practical training on all subjects associated with coffee. For more information, visit [www.udcmalaysia.com.my](http://www.udcmalaysia.com.my).



Viola, the perfect beverage.



Easy does it... for that great espresso.



If you're looking for an espresso machine, Cosset suggests you keep the following criteria in mind. The first is what he calls the "quality in the cup". "This means it must extract crema." Then, it must be reliable and not break down easily. If you're making no more than 60 cups of coffee a day, an entry-level machine will suffice.

Asians like milk with their coffee. It, therefore, makes sense to invest in a machine that can also produce milk froth. Last of all, you should consider the design. After all, what's the point of getting the futuristic looking Mistral model when the theme for your establishment is Country, Rustic Charm? These criteria become all the more important when the price

tag for the relatively simple Linea model is about RM30,000.

It makes sense that the machine will only produce perfect espresso if the raw ingredients it's fed are equally perfect. When using a La Marzocco espresso machine, Lee insists that the best coffee beans to use are those from Illycaffè.

"Illy chooses only the best Arabica beans." Smiling, she adds: "This coffee bean is closest in its number of chromosomes to humans. Just like humans, the blossoms take about seven to nine months to bear fruit."

Illycaffè buys the Arabica coffee beans directly from coffee producers. Once selected, the coffee beans are shipped in specially lined containers

to prevent them becoming mouldy. Upon arrival in Trieste, Italy (where Illycaffè has its headquarters), only beans that have survived the voyage intact are chosen to be roasted between 200°C and 220°C.

After this, they go through the pressurisation process invented by Francesco Illy — roasted beans are placed in cans where the air is replaced with inert gases and sealed, thereby, allowing the coffee beans to retain their aroma for a longer period. "The perfect blend of illy coffee will have nine different aromas: caramel, chocolate, floral, fruity, walnut, toast, spicy, malt and tobacco," says Lee.

"They correspond to the nine geographical regions from where

these coffee beans originate. For example, a chocolaty aroma means the beans are from Brazil. If it's from Costa Rica, the aroma tends to be more caramel."

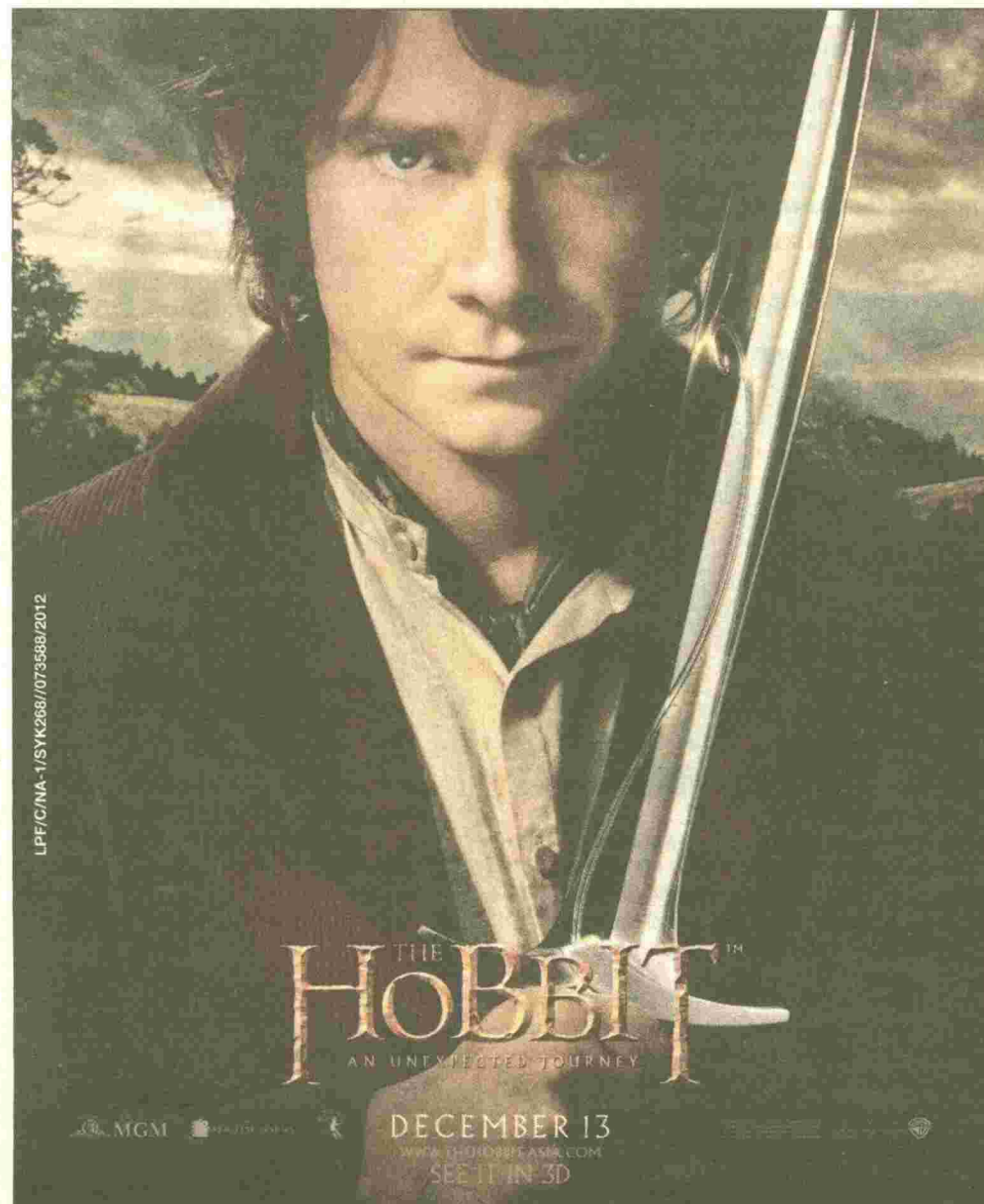
With a state-of-the-art coffee machine, the best coffee beans, all that's left is the human element: the barista. Goh Chee Wan, 34, barista extraordinaire, says: "In Italy, people will drink espresso at the bar. They're not served espresso at the table." Apparently, to differentiate barmen who served espresso from ordinary barmen, the Italians coined the word "barista".

"If your barista is in a bad mood, your espresso will probably be bad," says Goh.

Stress or impatience is likely to compromise the barista's skills. If he uses too much force during tamping (applying up to 20kg force to make ground coffee compact in the hand-held filter), the resulting over-extracted brew might taste bitter and burnt.

If the barista doesn't use enough force, you'll probably receive under-extracted espresso which is light in colour and tastes sour.

With this newfound appreciation of fine coffee, next time you visit a cafe, ensure your espresso has that crema; it should taste sweet with a balance between being sour and bitter. If you opt for latte or cappuccino, the milk foam must be smooth, fine and about 1cm thick. In other words, the coffee you're served must be perfect. [features@nst.com.my](mailto:features@nst.com.my)



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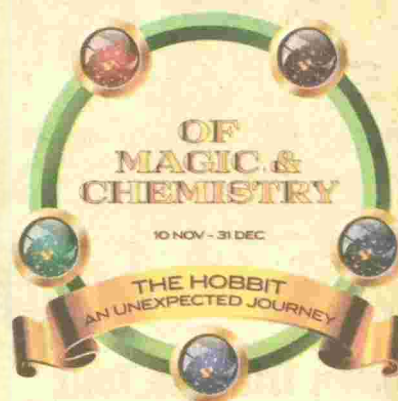
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