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Trail of the unexpected: Paris' coffee culture

Parisian coffee was once a bitter black mark on French cuisine. No longer, says Tilly Culme-Seymour

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Almost a decade ago, I was living in Paris as part of a university exchange programme. And if one thing was synonymous with *la vie française* (alongside eating tartine, drinking beaujolais nouveau and smoking) it was drinking strong, very bitter coffee. My morning caffeine hit at the bar on the corner of the rue des Saints-Pères was something I just did, rather than an event that brought any enjoyment. I wondered why almost everything in the city tasted wonderful except the coffee, which was, well, *dégueulasse*.

Inexplicably, France, which prides itself on gastronomic excellence, seemed willing to put up with average coffee. So, on a return trip I decided to see if anything had changed. I took a taxi to the 17th arrondissement, west of the boulevard de Clichy, to Café Lomi.

I had heard that they roasted some of the best coffee in Paris, favoured by a new generation of café owners and restaurateurs, such as Alice Quillet and Ana Trattles, chefs at [Le Bal Café](#), a new gallery/brasserie which is causing a stir for its robust British-French cooking.

Café Lomi looks from the outside like a small, cluttered science laboratory. It is not a café at all, but a wholesale supply initiative set up by specialist coffee roasters, Aleaume Paturle and Paul Arnephy. Used for "cupping" sessions – coffee tastings where experts swirl, savour, and assess the quality of the beans – and experimenting with brewing techniques, the rue de Saussure atelier is where all but the roasting takes place (a warehouse in the banlieue serves this purpose).

"The work of the roaster is to source the best coffee from the best plantations, and to bring out the essential characteristics of the bean through the roasting process," said Aleaume.

People who stop by are welcomed and will be given a cup of their favourite brew for the trouble, as was the case when three coffee-starved Australians knocked on the window in need of espresso. (Aleaume recommends calling ahead before you plan to visit.) But, for now, Paul and Aleaume are keeping things simple: no cash register, no cakes, just them and the coffee.

When I ask for something to keep me going until the tasting, Paul offered me a choice of espresso-based coffees, filter, or Chemex (a design-classic coffee maker in the shape of an hour-glass). Nursing an expertly fern-leaved flat white, I asked him what difference my choice would make when it came to tasting the beans.

"An espresso is like a magnifying glass – it all starts with the espresso. But single estate especially is best tasted in a drip, a piston or a Chemex, which allow the particular characteristics of the coffee to shine."

This pursuit of the right way to taste is a specialist interest. Most of Lomi's clients request the standard espresso blend, a product arrived at after the lengthy process of balancing and harmonising from the initial tastings.

From nearby café Kooka Boora, where customers can order bags of Lomi beans, to Sugarplum in the studenty 5th arrondissement with its glorious cheesecake and Génoise sponges to go with coffee, the advent of the Lomi bean has had a transformative effect on the quality of coffee you can expect in plum pockets of the city.

Le Bal Café is typical of the sort of place that is interested in sourcing coffee from suppliers who don't over-roast their beans (the reason why most French coffees taste bitter). Ana and Alice met while working at Rose Bakery and set up the café with Alice's husband, Anselme. Monthly cupping sessions and competitions in latte art, called [Frog Fight](#), take place both at Le Bal and at the Lomi atelier and are open to anyone interested in tasting (and admiring) high-class coffee. Expect the wine to flow and rowdy argument when it comes to who wins the prizes.

"Culturally, we became used to drinking Robusta coffees from west and central Africa," Aleaume said when I questioned him about the grades of coffee most commonly used. Robusta beans are harsher in taste, and contain up to 50 per cent more caffeine than highly prized Arabica. "The food in France – it is decent everywhere. With coffee, what we had was drinkable. Just. There has not been enough drive to change."

Putting me through my paces, Aleaume weighed a Guatemalan and an Ethiopian single estate for me to try. He whisked around the cups on the table like a magician. Pushing back the thick grounds that had settled creamily on the surface, I took in the aroma, the first step to tasting. The Ethiopian was full of bright citrus notes – Paul likened it to a sweet lemon cake. The Guatemalan smelled of tobacco and earth. Then we slurped the cooled coffee. ("Good coffee will still taste good when it is almost room temperature," said Paul.)

Cupping is a painstaking process but it teaches you about what to look for when you buy, whether you like your coffee with milk, in which case a higher acidity coffee works best, or if you take it long and black.

Before leaving, I asked Aleaume if he would be interested in supplying coffee further afield, to neighbouring European countries. He shrugged: "We want Paris, Paris, and Paris." Vive la revolution.

* Café Lomi, 9 rue de Saussure, 75017 (00 33 9 51 27 46 31; cafelomi.com). Details of Frog Fight events are at frogfight.tumblr.com.

* Le Bal Café, 6 Impasse de la Défense, 75018 (00 33 1 44 70 75 51; le-bal.fr)

* Kooka Boora, 62 rue des Martyrs, 75009 (00 33 1 56 92 12 41)

* Sugarplum, 68 rue du Cardinal Lemoine, 75005 (00 33 1 46 34 07 43; sugarplumcakeshop.com)

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