

Is a \$5 cup too rich? Well ...

COFFEE | Caffe Artigiano is selling gourmet Brazilian beans timed to the World Cup; it's notable, but not as strong as one might expect

BY MIA STAINSBY
VANCOUVER SUN

It's not the most outrageously expensive cup of coffee to hit this city. That would be the \$600-a-pound Kopi Luwak that Urban Fare sold a few years ago, the coffee otherwise known as cat poop coffee in honour of its exotic journey down the digestive tract of the civet (luwak) cat. It is said the stomach enzymes add a unique flavour and I totally believe it. "Good to the last dropping" was the marketing catchphrase.

On a more affordable footing, Caffe Artigiano yesterday started selling a \$5 cup (12 ounces) of Brazilian coffee, timed to begin with the World Cup. It's available now in all of their five coffee bars in Vancouver and West Vancouver. At that price, it's about double the cost of their other brewed coffees. And Starbucks, too.

And why?

Caffe Artigiano paid a record \$49.75 US a pound for it through the Cup of Excellence auction. "There were only 12 bags produced. The demand was high and it drove the price up," Vince Piccolo, president of the company, says of these hand-picked coffee beans. The highest previous price for Brazilian in that auction was \$13.65 US. Caffe Artigiano will only be selling it brewed.

I had to try this \$5 cup of coffee to see what extraordinary coffee tastes like. It was awarded 95.85 points out of 100 by an international jury, toppling 553 other entries. It was the highest score ever given in the Cup of Excellence tests. "It's got great acidity, body and sweetness and leaves an extraordinary aftertaste," Piccolo said. "It's what professional cuppers look for. [Cupping, in regular

parlance, means tasting.]

"I actually taste a lot of tropical fruits," he said. "It's similar to drinking a great white burgundy. It's so unique I actually had flavours in my mouth for two hours after I'd cupped it. It's got a clean taste, not typical of Brazilian coffee, which is often associated with the lower end of coffee."

I (in no way experienced in the art of cupping) had a cup. "It's the first cup, ever," Piccolo said as he brewed it, "breaking the crust" and mixing the grounds as it brewed. At the Hornby Street location, they'll be making the coffee with the \$8,500 US Clover Roaster brewing machine, which grinds and brews coffee in 40 seconds to specific calibrations. The other outlets will serve it in french press coffee pots.

Piccolo had only tasted the coffee during cupping and he watched in anticipation as I leaned in to note the aroma. The professionals, you understand, have all the passion, the lingo, the artifacts and discriminating taste buds of wine geeks. The proper way to taste is with a cupping spoon, not unlike a soup spoon. "You slurp it to spray the coffee around the mouth," Piccolo says. I didn't have this opportunity to slurp, spray and create a stir in the crowded coffee bar.

You have to know, people are coming from Denver, San Diego, Seattle and Portland in the next week, just to try it. And his regular customers have been anticipating this like a Beaujolais Nouveau release.

I have to say, the aroma wasn't as strong as I'd anticipated. I taste. Somehow I was expecting a punch in my mouth. Bold, exciting, more merlot than chardonnay, which, I'd say, is its wine equivalent. The Brazil Fazenda Santa

Ines greets the mouth gently, smoothly and with a great deal of civility.

"I was expecting it to be stronger," I say, explaining I'm a fan of dark roast — to which Piccolo has much to say.

"We don't like to roast our coffees too dark. Here, in North America, coffee is roasted darker because people use milk or sugar. Dark roasts are one of the biggest rip-offs in coffee. It hides flaws. People call it Italian or French roasts. They don't label the country or the origin.

"This coffee," he explains, "is really naked. It doesn't hide flaws."

I don't spray, but I do swirl it in my mouth. Yes, I'm getting flavours, quite rounded ones.

"How is your aftertaste now?" he asks. "When people drink this quality of coffee, they don't quite get it until they leave."

It's certainly notable. The coffee is good but my taste buds are used to the rip-off taste of near-burned coffee beans.

But I do think the serious coffee geeks have something to teach us. And perhaps my expectation of good coffee as blunt instrument will evolve to appreciate finer nuances.

Certainly, like the \$39 Feenie's burger with foie gras, it's one of those treats that can make you feel like you've blown a lot of money for a little luxe in your life, but really, you haven't.

The money they paid at auction, Piccolo points out, went straight to the farmer. In Cup of Excellence auctions; there are no middlemen, he says. "The owner of this plantation bought all seven of his children computers and he's making improvements to his plantation. This system gives farmers tremendous hope."

He says the Fazenda Santa Ines coffee was not a fluke crop. "It was the right climate, picked at exactly the right time and processed properly."

Piccolo says he has enough of the coffee to last until about Christmas. "Then it's gone forever."