

A matter of taste

An expert tells **Syida Lizta Amirul Ihsan** what kind of coffee Malaysians like and how to spot bad tea

THE rise of the coffee culture brings about a kind of snobbery when it comes to the drink. Example: Espresso. You know your coffee. Chances are, you are a man.

Long black. With just a bit of sugar, if you must.

Cappuccino. In Italy, only during breakfast.

Skinny latte. Must be a woman on a diet.

But for The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf Asia Pacific franchise operations director Mohd Feroz Abdul Karim, 40, everything boils down to taste.

"Taste is personal. You may like Arabica coffee, grown on high altitudes or Robusta, grown on lower lands. Who's to say your taste is superior or inferior?"

But he admits that there is a higher expectation where coffee is concerned as consumers are willing to fork out a substantial sum for this drink.

"Unlike tea, which requires only a tea bag and hot water, coffee making is a skill. The quality of the drink depends, as the Italians say, on the beans, the machine and the hand making it. So customers expect good coffee when they dine out," he says.

Born and bred in Seremban, Negri Sembilan, Mohd Feroz spent the last 16 years working with the company, starting as a training manager when its first outlet in the country opened in KL Plaza, Kuala Lumpur.

He has studied coffee in Italy. In his office, he has various coffee machines by Illy, Lavazza, Nespresso and others, so he will know what the rest of the market offers. His responsibility includes handling new outlet opening in the Asia Pacific.

He says that in the past 16 years, he has seen a robust development in the coffee culture here.

"The public knows more about

coffee, and coffee chains give the market new options and knowledge about the different kinds of coffee, exploring new varieties and getting people to try new things. That's how the public is educated," he says.

MALAYSIANS AND COFFEE

Like our neighbouring countries, Malaysians, Mohd Feroz says, love

espresso-based drinks, but not straight espresso. This means that cappuccino, latte and other drinks that mix espresso with milk and sugar sell well.

The best shot of espresso, he explains, is made with 7g coffee and 30ml water.

"Espresso-based drinks make up 85 per cent of CBTL sales," he says. That also explains why an espresso shot at CBTL has less acidity than say, a shot of Illy's espresso.

"We need to cater to our market. Espresso with high acidity doesn't make good espresso-based drinks. So we cannot produce espresso with high acidity when our espresso sale is just five per cent," he says.

"You are a rare breed," he tells me as I sip an espresso. "It's not easy to find a woman, Malay to boot and in tudung who drinks espresso."

When it comes to making good quality coffee at home, Mohd Feroz says the culture of single serve coffee capsules where you pop a capsule into your coffee machine for a cuppa, is still slow to catch on here.

"It's popular in Europe because Europeans are regular coffee drinkers and they normally take espresso. Here, good coffee is still something we drink in a restaurant or coffee chain."

Most coffee chains have their own home coffee machine with matching capsules, but CBTL machines are more utilitarian and can make tea, coffee and chocolate drinks.

"We didn't want to have just another coffee machine. We want a beverage machine, which the whole family can enjoy," he says.



The various coffee produced for retail by The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.



"Who's to say your taste is superior or inferior?"

Mohd Feroz Abd Karim



Coffee beans are the base of various drinks.

PICTURES BY NIK ROSLI ISHAK



READY TO GO

THE Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf utilises Malaysian expertise for its new project, which Mohd Feroz spearheaded — a selection of ready coffee and tea sold in retail outlets.

The tea and coffee boxes are packed by the Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority and research on ginseng (the root is infused in one of the coffee varieties) was conducted in collaboration with Universiti Putra Malaysia.

"We don't want to shout about it, but it's our way of working with the country," he says.

The products include 3-in-1 and 4-in-1 coffee (from RM16.50 per box) that come with Korean ginseng. Both are made with Arabica

Columbian coffee beans.

The Ready-To-Drink bottled teas (RM3.50) come in three flavours — Iced Lemon Tea, Iced Peach Tea and Iced Jasmine Oolong Tea. There's also Sparkling Iced Tea (RM3.80) in apple, lemon and berries flavours.

The Fresh Leaf series of teas (from RM15.20) are made from garden grown and hand plucked leaves that give a smooth overflowing tone. Each sachet is individually packed in eco-friendly special food grade nylon with no chemical glue. The Lion logo is an endorsement by the Sri Lankan Tea Board for premium grade teas. It comes in four different flavours — English Breakfast, Earl Grey, Chamomile and Mint.

For Mohd Feroz, his normal drink is a long black, no sugar, no milk. "When you travel so much, you need to have something to keep you on the go," he says.

TIME FOR TEA

Tea is something Mohd Feroz drinks when he has time. "I drink tea in the plane when I have nothing to do," he says.

But when he really has time, it's more than that. It's not exactly the kind of tea ritual experts tell you about, but it's something he does to ascertain the quality of the tea he is drinking.

First, he makes sure the tea is foil-packed, not just sealed in what he calls "paper envelope".

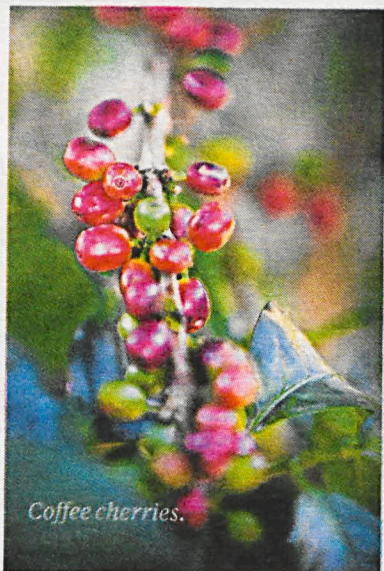
"That is my bottom line, if the tea bags aren't properly sealed, the aroma leaves the package."

Then, he tears open the tea bag and pours its contents on white paper to be sure he is drinking tea leaves, not dust.

"The best is orange pekoe, followed by broken orange pekoe. The kind of roast people like is subjective, but the leaves have to be of good quality," he says.

"I have not always been so knowledgeable, you know. But over the years, I have learnt a lot about coffee and tea and I know how good quality drinks should taste.

"Once you know what good coffee and tea taste like, you cannot go back to badly, or cheaply produced drinks." slizta@nstp.com.my



Coffee cherries.