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Normandy's Château
de Tocqueville

The New Coffee
Cult in Paris

French Design:
Summer Chic

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CONTENTS

JULY/AUGUST 2012

4 CALENDAR
What's On & What's Up

6 A LA CARTE

10 BOUTIQUE BEAT
Footloose and Fancy



12 DESIGN NOW
Inspired Ideas for
Chic Summer Habitats

14 STREETS OF PARIS
Coffee Cafés:
The new wave

**17 The Château de
Tocqueville**
Ancestral home of
the author of
Democracy in America

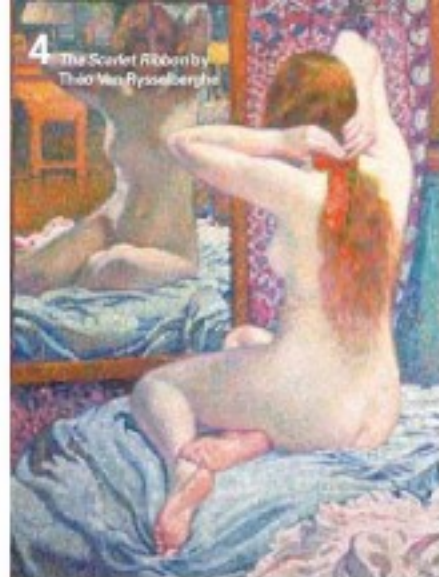
21 WINE & SPIRITS
Lillet: Licensed to Chill

24 FRENCH KITCHEN
Herbs in a
Midsummer Garden

28 FILM PICKS
Top Films by
Claude Miller

29 RENCONTRE
Author David Foenkinos

**31 LE MARCHÉ &
CLASSIFIEDS**



Coffee Cafés

by Jennifer Ladonne

There's a new revolution underway in Paris, and like most French revolutions, it began in a café and confronts an injustice: the very bad coffee.

To lament the caustic Parisian brew that often passes for espresso—an *express*, or *petit noir*—is by now a given, but until 2005 few café customers took much notice. It was easy to overlook the coffee for the ritual: the demitasse, the tidy sugar packets, the people-watching and newspaper reading, the table outside in the sun (maybe), the right to linger all morning or all day for the price of a cup. This is café culture, but it's not coffee culture—a distinction central to the movement that is rapidly gaining momentum in the French capital.

Considering the state of coffee pretty much anywhere, it's not exactly sporting to pick on the French, but we foreigners do because we expect them to know better. Why wouldn't a people that raised food to an art form care more about the first thing they toss back in the morning? Why is a superb meal in a great restaurant destined for a bitter end?

"It's what the French are used to," says Antoine Netien, co-owner of *Coutume Café*, one of Paris's pioneering *nouvelle vague* coffee shops and roasters. And more to the point, "they don't know any better." Netien speaks from experience. A Lyonnais working in cinema, he moved to Melbourne, "where even the gas stations serve great coffee," he says, and had his first taste of an Australian espresso. Netien was hooked, and ended up learning the trade, first with one of Melbourne's top coffee aficionados and later with a prominent roaster. He won Australia's prestigious Golden Bean Award in 2007 and earned the status of master roaster.

According to Netien, the French *petit noir*, or *express*, a bitter cup in the best of times, became more uniformly so in the 1980s, when big suppliers, like *Cafés Richard*, made an offer café owners couldn't refuse—free machines and beans in return for brand loyalty. "Coffee became like any other café

staple: beer, wine, sugar, toilet paper," says Netien. "The coffee all came from the same supplier, and it was all standard issue." Café workers weren't adequately trained, machines weren't properly cleaned and the beans were a routine blend of Robusta, one of two coffee varieties, and not the good one. (The other is Arabica.)

The Guatemala connection

It took a bit of diplomacy to get the word out, and the goods. Enter Gloria Montenegro, the undisputed doyenne of the Paris coffee revolution. Montenegro was well acquainted with both sides of the coffee coin, having grown up in Guatemala near the growers from whom her mother would buy beans to roast at home. "When we were children, my mother would put a few drops of coffee in our milk," she recounts. After years of tasting good coffee from the local growers, Montenegro learned to be discerning. And as the former Guatemalan Ambassador to France, she was well connected, a handy asset when she opened her own café, the first in Paris dedicated to very high quality, single-origin coffees.

Since 2000, Montenegro had been traveling the world, meeting growers and suppliers, organizing tastings and educating herself in coffee culture, from bean to barista. "When

you pick a coffee cherry the quality of your cup is already determined. All the rest is enhancing or destroying what nature created," says Montenegro. Her self-appointed task was to see that the noble coffee cherry received the treatment it, and the consumer, deserved, from start to finish. That meant education at every step of the process—the science of coffee, or, as Montenegro terms it, *coffeeology*.

In 2001, she began hosting an ongoing series of tastings at *Café Procope*, Paris's oldest café, where the city's first cup of coffee was served in 1686. From these *dégustations*, she and a dozen other connoisseurs designed an "oenologic" protocol to organize the world's coffees. Adopting wine terminology, their classification emphasizes the notion of *terroir* and the geographic, geologic and climatic factors—altitude, proximity to a volcano, degree of slope, biodiversity and more—that determine the specific aromatic qualities of the final brew. They also set out to award "grand cru" status to certain *terroirs*—no mean feat, with some 5 million coffee plantations in 72 coffee-producing nations.

Finally, in 2005, Montenegro opened *La Caféthèque*. Tucked in a 17th-century building on an old cobbled street near Paris's city hall, it was soon a haven for coffee lovers, who came as much for the fragrant, velvety espresso as for the camaraderie. As word got out, the little coffeehouse morphed into a sort of pilgrimage stop for international aficionados and enthusiasts seeking a good cup of joe.

Passionate baristas

The point of Montenegro's efforts was to educate the consumer, and the best way to do that was to serve great coffee. Once the best



beans were identified, imported and properly roasted, it essentially came down to the person at end of the coffee chain, who could make or break the final product: the barista. A great barista, according to master of the trade Emilio Rodrigues, as quoted in *La Caf  oth  que's* Coffeeology manual, is "part sommelier, part oenologist, part bartender and part artist". He might have added part entrepreneur.

After *La Caf  oth  que*, it took some five years for the next wave of coffee-centric caf  s to emerge, driven largely by a group of passionate young baristas, well-schooled in the global coffee movement. Iranian-American ex-New Yorker Merce Muse was first on the new scene. Nostalgic for her East 10th Street neighborhood caf  , in June 2010 she opened *Merce and the Muse*, a funky East Village-style coffeehouse in an undiscovered corner of the upper Marais. Furnished with mismatched furniture and flea market finds, the caf   has a laid back feel—except when it comes to the coffee. Muse traveled to the hallowed Coffee Collective in Copenhagen for her barista training, invested in the best machinery and took the plunge. Serving imaginative food, Muse's homemade pastries and outstanding coffee, the caf   drew more than just foreigners and local hipsters— aspiring baristas also took note.

Frog Fight

In the last two years at least five more coffee caf  s have sprung up, each with its own distinct appeal and personality.

"We were like a community of surfers in the middle of the Sahara," says Nicolas Clerc, co-owner of *T  lescope*, near the Palais Royal, the city's newest—and most elegant—coffee outpost. A Parisian photographer and coffee lover, Clerc found his way to the Caf  oth  que, where he met American David Flynn, a barista there who'd learned his trade at Murky, a Washington, D.C. mecca, in his student days. Clerc traveled to New York for barista training before teaming up with Flynn to open *T  lescope*. Clean-lined and calm, the caf   is a great place to while away a morning, savoring a pastry and an ambrosial coffee. But it's the partners' pure pleasure in what they're doing—and some of Paris's most masterfully prepared coffee—that gives the place its glow.

Flynn is also the founder of Frog Fight, a monthly roving barista contest where six to eight baristas compete in front of a jury of peers and anyone else who pops in for the fun. More party than competition, coffee is savored and a good time is had by all.



The terrace of Le Bal Caf  

A sometime Frog Fight host, sleek *Le Bal Caf  * is an art gallery, bookstore, restaurant and caf   on a cobbled, out-of-the-way enclave in the 18th arrondissement. A year ago, finding it was a challenge; now, just exit the Place de Clichy M  tro station and follow the signs. Brunches at *Le Bal* are a congenial if crowded affair, the spare, well-lit room and the popular terrace attract a teeming m  lange of young families, expats, tourists and groggy Parisians in desperate need of a fine coffee wakeup.

Founded by two chefs, *Le Bal* is a rare caf   where the food is as good as the coffee, or vice versa. Standard British dishes with a French twist—rabbit and *lardon* pie replaces steak and kidney—are fresh, inventive and market-driven. *Le Bal* has given a group of talented baristas an important outlet, and the community spirit is palpable.

That spirit defines Paris's new coffee culture. Like any revolution, it takes a community of ardent, like-minded people. They're passionate about coffee and enthusiastic about each other—the young barista at the excellent *Kooka Boora* caf   refers to David Flynn as "awesome", the barista at *Coutume Caf  * recommends the new boutique-caf   *Le Rocketship*, where the coffee is "pretty serious". They're dedicated to spreading the word, and having a great time along the way. *T  lescope* and *Coutume* offer seminars for professionals and amateurs, and *T  lescope* hosts pop-up caf  s around town. Bean samples are shared like cherished recipes, and while there's certainly competition, if the Frog Fight fun is any indication, it's friendly.

Paris is now poised for the third wave of coffee culture. With several caf  s already planning

offshoots, it's only a matter of time before the revolution transforms the Paris coffee scene. As Nicolas Clerc says: "Once you taste it, there's no going back." ■

Coutume Caf   47 rue de Babylone, 7th.

La Caf  oth  que 52 rue de l'H  tel de Ville, 4th. www.lacafeotheque.com

Merce and the Muse 1 bis rue Charles-Fran  ois Dupuis, 3rd. www.merceandthemuse.com

T  lescope 5 rue Villedo, 1st. www.telescopecafe.com

Le Bal Caf   6 impasse de la D  fense, 18th. www.le-bal.fr

Kooka Boora 62 rue des Martyrs, 9th

Le Rocketship 13 bis rue Henry Monnier, 9th. www.lerocketship.com

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Barista David Flynn at Telescope