

Excerpt from

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF COFFEE AND CAFES

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INSTANT BUZZ

WAR HAS A lot to answer for, not the least of which is the creation of instant coffee. War speeds things up. So does caffeine. The two went together like sugar and cream.

The idea of instant coffee actually goes back a long way before Nescafé tried to take over the world. In the battle of the brews someone or other was always trying to get the essence of it bottled or tinned – both for the sake of convenience, as making coffee back in the 19th century was a time-consuming process, and because sometimes there simply wasn't a roasting pan and grinder readily available. As the coffee drink evolved from pleasure to habit to necessity, immediate availability became an issue.

From the point of view of the coffee traders, being able to sell the essence of coffee rather than the beans meant that nobody asked where coffee came from. By the time coffee was a standard item of sale in grocer's shops, people had become aware of the differences in taste between 'milds' and 'Brazils' (often a euphemism for 'rough') and, if they had a choice – though often, they didn't – opted for Mocha or Java, which meant 'smooth'. As coffee was usually mislabelled – and who was to know? – being told

where it came from didn't really mean much, unless you were lucky enough to have a coffee merchant living next door. But as time went on, more people became savvy about buying beans and opted to purchase them from tradesmen they could trust.

Selling the essence of coffee, rather than coffee itself, avoided a lot of tricky issues. It could be stored indefinitely without loss of quality, since quality wasn't the question. And it could be consumed anywhere, anytime, without need of special paraphernalia.

So, from the very beginning, instant coffee was understood both by traders and producers to be the magic bullet that would someday give the coffee business unlimited reach into, then, unreachable markets. It wasn't coffee lovers these merchants were interested in. People who loved coffee were already hooked, knew where to buy it and how to prepare it. The dealers were after the masses of people who didn't care about coffee itself, had never actually tasted decent coffee, and simply wanted a caffeine buzz.

The first successful 'instant' coffee was hardly coffee at all. Created by Paterson & Sons of Glasgow in 1876, Camp Coffee was barely five percent coffee essence and twenty-five percent chicory in a solution of sugar water. It came in a flat-sided glass bottle affixed with a label that depicted a seriously kilted Scots soldier sitting outside his tent, sword at his feet, holding aloft a cup and saucer. A turbaned Sikh

servant stands at his side, holding a tray containing a bottle of Camp and a pitcher. In the background are the rugged cliffs of a snow-white mountain with a banner stuck at the very top, emblazoned with the words, 'Ready Aye Ready'. The text on the label reads 'Camp Coffee and Chicory Essence'. And in small letters at the very bottom of the label are instructions to mix a spoonful in a cup with boiling water and cream.

How much of this stuff actually made it onto the battlefields of India, Afghanistan, Sudan or wherever else the British army fought in those years, is open to question – though one might assume quite a lot as the product lasted up until the present day (though now it seems to be used primarily for adding flavour to pastries and cakes).

I remember an old friend telling me how he grew up drinking Camp and didn't have real coffee until he went to Paris as a young man. He remembered the flavour with childhood affection – which probably says more about the distorting power of memory than of the physiology of taste buds. Although, I suppose with enough sugar we can learn to like anything.

There were many attempts at trying to get a soluble form of coffee that captured the aroma and taste of a freshly brewed cup – an impossibility, of course, but since access to real coffee was still limited, for many people there was nothing to compare. Coffee, however, is a very delicate substance; if it isn't

treated right it gets bitter, like a petulant child. Once ground, it deteriorates quickly when left out in the air, therefore it needs to be brewed and consumed soon after granulation. So capturing that moment of goodness and saving it intact for later consumption was quite a challenge.

The first commercial breakthrough came in 1901, at the Pan American Exhibition held in Buffalo, New York, where a small booth was set up by Kato Coffee Company. A leaflet handed out at the time read, 'Satori Kato is the name of a scholarly Japanese who after many years of research and study has succeeded in discovering a process for the condensation and purification of coffee. The great value of this discovery is made apparent by practical demonstration at the booth, Sec. J. Liberal Arts Building.'

Japanese-born American chemist, Dr. Satori Kato, had developed a dehydration process for making soluble coffee at the behest of an American coffee importer. The result that was first put on public display at the Exposition in Buffalo, was then marketed through a Chicago company set up under Dr. Kato's name.

Reading over the advertorial bumph that the Kato Coffee Company used to introduce their instant enterprise is fascinating and instructive, if not a bit comical. Early coffee ads felt obliged to state the obvious, since people had yet to be inundated with the commercial barrage that later generations

learned to ignore unless presented with candy-coated dreams that spelled out 'happily ever after' in glorious Technicolor.

Kato Coffee's promotional information began by focusing on the economics, claiming that their extraction process reduced ordinary coffee to one-tenth its weight – but emphasizing this small fraction contained more actual cups than in a full pound of beans. Also, less sugar was required (still a costly item in 1901), 'owing to the withdrawal of the rank and bitter elements.'

Then they pointed out the ease of preparation: 'Kato Coffee requires neither roasting nor grinding. A pure, fresh and delicious cup of your favorite beverage is at your command at "a moments" notice. It requires no expert cook to prepare it; a child can produce the same result as an adult.' (Note the sequence of key adjectives: 'pure, fresh, delicious'. Truth in advertising was no more an issue in 1901 than it is today.)

Another matter they addressed was the avoidance of mess – a supposed concern of turn-of-the-century housewives or at least those imagined by Kato's copywriters: 'Kato Coffee, is made cleanly. It may safely be made in your parlor or in the midst of your gathered friends at the social board. It leaves no grounds.'

Health issues were touched upon as well. Kato assured their potential customers that all the deleterious properties of coffee had been eliminated,

such as: 'The woody fiber (or coffee grounds) which are indigestible, the rancid fats, that lead to so many cases of Dyspepsia, and above all, a greater portion of the caffeine, known to the medicinal world as — The Arch Enemy of the Nerve System.'

And who would use it? Kato Coffee listed them out, exclaiming that their instant product 'will prove a marvel of convenience to the Housekeeper, the Bachelor, the Soldier or Sailor, the Explorer, Traveler, Hunter, and for Camp Life, in fact, to the lover and drinker of coffee the world over, owing to the simplicity of preparing the beverage.'

How about that?

Curiously, the booth where Kato Coffee Company was prophesising a new world of instant, dyspepsia-free coffee was right around the corner from the Puerto Rican exhibit which was touting some of their very fine Arabicas grown in the Yauco mountains by Corsican immigrants since the early 1800s. President William McKinley, a coffee lover who was known to friend and foe as 'Coffee Bill', had stopped by to sample a cup of the Puerto Rican variety shortly before he was assassinated. Whether American history would have been rewritten had McKinley tried Kato's instant instead is unlikely.

In 1910 an instant coffee company was founded by a Belgian immigrant to the United States with the very convenient name of George Washington. Washington had studied Chemistry in Germany at

the University of Bonn and had lived in Guatemala where he would have come in contact with the large community of German coffee planters. Having hit upon a process of making instant coffee, Washington set up shop in New York City.

The G. Washington Coffee Company was a well-funded operation that projected a 'real American' image rather than one of exotic oriental, even though Kato had probably lived in America longer than Washington. But this theme of 'Americanism', which was often a coded term for white, Christian, European, played well in the run-up to World War I – even though by 1914 Washington's German links would have been problematic should they have been made public (though having the fortuitous name of 'George Washington' provided excellent cover).

World War I, however, gave G. Washington Coffee a splendid opportunity to imbed its product within a closed community of desperate soldiers who found the bitter taste of this soluble gunk fitted in quite well with life in their rat-infested trenches: it kept them awake enough to appreciate the pure horrors of war.

Washington Coffee used their war credentials to good advantage after the troops came marching home, unemployed but victorious, trumpeting its slogans on posters and in ads: 'Went to War and Home Again! Supplied to the boys in the trenches because the Government wanted them to have the best. Now that it is home again, you can have the best!'

One of the devices G. Washington Coffee used to convince people to buy instant coffee despite their many reservations was linking it to the zeitgeist of modernism. Instant coffee was the wave of the future and the future was now. Interestingly, they hit upon the metaphor of sugar as a way of connection: 'Do you know that there are millions of people who have stopped using the ground bean? Back yonder everyone used whole brown sugar – without refining – now everyone uses refined, white granulated sugar. In the same way, millions have stopped using bean coffee, with its messy grounds – and are using refined coffee, made by Mr. G. Washington's special refining process. G. Washington's coffee is just as superior to whole bean coffee as modern white sugar is to old-fashioned brown sugar.'

Heavily refined, white granulated sugar had been sold to the public as better than brown (just as over-refined white bread had become 'better' than whole wheat) because it was white, and white was the colour of purity, and because it was easily soluble. This combination of purity, solubility and modernity was a powerful triumvirate in convincing the American people to make the switch from real to instant. There was only one problem – it tasted horrible.

It took the combination of two more significant events to push instant coffee into the mainstream of

consumption: problems in Brazil and another world war.

The economic crisis of 1929 found Brazil with vast stockpiles of coffee sitting in overflowing warehouses, unsold and unwanted. In desperation, millions of coffee beans were either burned or thrown into the ocean by government fiat in a last-ditch effort to protect the plummeting price of upcoming harvests. Vast fortunes were lost in the coffee trade. But in Switzerland, this worldwide disaster was looked upon as just another financial opportunity.

Nestlé, had long wanted to expand their commodities empire of condensed milk and chocolate. The company, based in Switzerland, which operated factories in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain, was one of the pioneers in using highly professional and well-organised scientific research laboratories to develop new technologies for the food industry.

World War I created a demand for powdered dairy products that Nestlé was quick to provide. But the end of the war and the return to fresh milk saw their profits plummet, so the company was keen to develop new products for the post-war market.

The crisis in Brazil, along with Nestlé's analysis of global coffee trends, convinced them that there were excellent prospects investing in cheap coffee if they could create something that up till then had eluded even the most brilliant scientists – making a soluble form of coffee that actually tasted good.

Having previously developed a technique for dehydrating milk that was used in the manufacture of milk chocolate and powdered dairy products, they seemed to have the technology required for success. The task, however, was more complicated than they had imagined.

The company commissioned a young chemist, Max Morgenthaler, to head the project of creating a coffee extract powder that they hoped would set a new standard for instant brew. After seven years of failed attempts, Morgenthaler finally achieved the desired results by spray-drying liquid coffee under high pressure to create a rich, soluble powder and the first drinkable instant yet produced. In April 1938, Nescafé was finally launched – just in time for World War II. So, again, it was war and the American armed forces that gave instant coffee, phase 2, a boost as packets were provided for soldiers' daily food rations.

Nescafé became the first truly successful instant coffee distributed widely on a global scale. As its home office was situated in the neutral country of Switzerland, Nestlé avoided the difficulties of embargos and boycotts imposed on the Axis nations and the countries they occupied. But, even more, the agreements which Nestlé reached with Brazil whereby cheap coffee was contracted for processing into long-lasting instant that could be warehoused, shelved or sold any place at any time, paved the way toward a commodity chain under

corporate control that was to become so important in subsequent years.

The impetus in launching soluble coffee as a major commodity on a global scale may have been an overproduction of Arabica in Brazil, but it was Robusta that instant liked best. This simple fact suddenly gave coffee's ugly ducking a purpose and, curiously, paved the way for the control of the coffee trade by the giants of the processed food industry. Once people accepted instant coffee as an alternative to freshly ground and freshly brewed, it followed that highly capitalised and highly efficient corporations would be the ones to benefit as only they could bear the cost of production on a massive scale.

On the other hand, instant coffee, no matter what we might think of it in terms of taste, helped to expand the market into areas where coffee had rarely been consumed – such as rural communities in the Chinese hinterland. This further globalisation of coffee consumption spawned new areas of production in countries like Vietnam, with huge harvests dedicated almost entirely to the Asian instant coffee trade.

Instant coffee was brought about both by need and desire: the need of a coffee industry bursting at the seams and desperately searching for new and more lucrative horizons; and the desire of an ever anxious populace to find a ready boost for energy

exhaustion. The brave new world required instant buzz and a spoonful of brown powder mixed with boiling fluid in any kind of cup provided a quick and easy fix for midday slumps when a five-minute break was all that was on order. But for those many who became hooked on this artificial high, savouring the beauty of the bean in its gastronomic glory was, sadly, denied them. Instant coffee along with instant mashed potatoes and instant noodles in a pot, unfortunately defined a post-war generation. No wonder the children of the cultural revolution that followed turned it all on its head, making freshly brewed espresso into an obsession.

G Washington's
COFFEE

Supplied to the boys in the trenches because the Government wanted them to have the best. Now that it is home again, you can have the best.

Fresh coffee whenever you want it — as strong as you want it — or as mild as you want it — and exactly the number of cups you want.

No Waste. Makes delicious iced-coffee.

**MADE IN THE CUP
AT THE TABLE**

G Washington's
PREPARED COFFEE
MADE IN THE CUP AT THE TABLE
ABSOLUTELY PURE SOLUBLE COFFEE

*Went to War!
Home Again*