

CAFÉ CULTURE

The twin worlds of coffee and cycling are so perfectly fused as to be inseparable. *Cyclist* explores the long-running romance between bean and rider

Words **JAMES WITTS** Illustration **DANNY BIRD**



A weekend ride would hardly be complete without a coffee stop and a slice of cake, but caffeine has actually enjoyed a chequered

past in the professional peloton. The UCI once banned high doses of caffeine because of its perceived performance, mental and physical benefits, including a greater sense of alertness and increased fat burning. It rescinded that decision in 2004 to the relief of the pro ranks.

Tales of the pros and their love for coffee are legendary. In addition to his seismic thighs, Sir Chris Hoy used to lump around his coffee machine wherever he went. If that wasn't viable, he'd take a hand grinder and the finest coffee beans. Hoy even took a barista course in Perth, Australia, where he perfected his favourite brew: the double ristretto.

Hoy's not the only Olympic cycling legend who's honed their coffee ritual. Chris Boardman used to satisfy his caffeine urges at the famous Eureka Cafe on the A540, which is the main route into the west side of the Wirral Peninsula. It's been a regular stopping place for cyclists since 1929 and provided a perfect pre-training kick for a young Boardman.

'The meeting point for all rides was the Eureka,' says Boardman. 'I'd ride out, stop briefly to meet friends, have a coffee and arrange to be picked up there post-ride. It's still going strong.' To this day Boardman's practically comatose without his coffee hit, and has efficiently seconded his family into the daily ceremony.

'One of the benefits of having six children is the steady stream of AM baristas. As one



starts moaning and another comes of age, the mantle is passed. The wage bill hasn't matched inflation and still stands at £1 a cup (one for me, one for Mrs B). By the end of the week it adds up to a tidy sum. It's not an easy job, though. The beverages must be delivered at precisely 6.50am and come with peripheral responsibilities like letting the dog out.'

Team espresso

Scan any team bus and you'll discover coffee love is as fresh today as it ever has been. Within Team Sky's £750,000 Death Star are 10 leather swivel chairs, communications equipment, massage room, laptops, a sink, fridge... and state-of-the-art coffee machine. It's the same at Garmin-Sharp – a coffee

machine holding centre stage on the bus.

Yes, when it comes to coffee on the fly, the pros have it covered. 'We have an espresso machine on the bus,' says Trek Factory Racing's Tim Vanderjeugd. 'Most of the riders are big coffee drinkers. The machine empties very quickly, especially on the way to the start line. Sometimes it's the best coffee around. Hotel coffee isn't always pleasant to drink, except in Italy.'

Trek's love of the black stuff is renowned, with Jens Voigt recently tweeting: 'A great fan at Tour Down Under just gave me a bag with three different sorts of coffee in it! And some vegemite. How cool was that!'

But it's not just international riders on the UCI WorldTour that are fuelled by caffeine. ☑

Exquisite espresso

Sam Hunt, expert barista at Bristol's Roll for the Soul, reveals the secrets of coffee perfection

● Freshness is the key. Once it's been roasted, coffee has a very short lifespan, which is why coffee bags have an exit valve for gases but no way for the air to get back in. Gases inside the coffee expand and push out the oils. Once the oils exit the coffee bean, the flavour's gone.

● The layer at the top is called crema. It's the gases and oils combining, and seals in the flavour.

● Keep coffee beans sealed in a bag but not in the fridge. Storing them out of sunlight and slightly below room temperature is the ideal.

● Once you've opened a bag of coffee beans there's a clock ticking. You have maybe an hour before the flavour starts to deteriorate. But once you've ground it you have only 10-15mins.

● All our coffees are made with two shots of espresso, made with 15g of ground espresso beans. The consistency and quality of the grind is key to the whole process. The perfect coffee takes about 25secs to extract through the brewer head.

● A blend comprises different beans. You can get single-origin beans but they are rare and expensive.

● You need a type of bean that cuts through milk but also tastes good on its own. That depends on the bean itself and the plantation it's from.

● Coffee burns, which is why we keep the temperature of our water at a constant 90-93°C. It's also important to maintain oxygen in the water as it helps to preserve the taste of the coffee. That's why you should either let the water cool for a couple of minutes once boiled or, preferably, turn it off prior to boiling point.

● There are two main types of coffee bean: Arabica and Robusta. Arabica's

best grown in mountainous climates. Its longer growing cycle contributes to its higher cost than Robusta. Robusta flourishes at much lower altitudes than Arabica. That's because it's less vulnerable to insect attack due to a higher acid content. Those acids also increase the caffeine content and is why Arabica has a nicer taste – caffeine can taste slightly bitter.

● You can add oxygen to the water by copying the Turks. They'll keep the mug at table height but gradually lift the kettle higher when pouring. This is so the liquid can 'catch' more oxygen when moving through the air.

◀ The domestic professional scene’s equally receptive. Rapha’s Mike Cuming not surprisingly cites the famous Rapha Cafe as serving up a ‘wicked brew’ along with a cafe in Knutsford by the name of Tuscano. Though for him and his fellow pros, the luxury of a cafe stop is reserved for easy days – which are clearly a rare commodity in professional cycling. Cuming knows his stuff but the true Bicycling Barista is Andy Tennant. Tennant competes for Madison Genesis and is a bona-fide coffee connoisseur.

‘The darker the colour of the bean after roasting, the more heavily roasted it is,’ he says. ‘When they’re heavily roasted, the beans aren’t as good quality’; ‘A lighter roast gives you a brighter, fruitier coffee’; ‘What setting you have on a grinder for a great espresso isn’t always the same for milky coffee’; ‘Coffees will either come from different blends or a single origin (coffee from a single estate)’.

And that’s not forgetting Tennant’s perfect cuppa: ‘I always start a ride with a flat white. It should be made with a double ristretto [a shorter, bolder shot of espresso]. Modern baristas are using higher doses of caffeine (19g) than the traditional Italian technique (14g). They try to achieve an extraction of 65% so the espresso weighs around 29g. It should be served in a 5-6oz cup, the milk lightly aerated and foaming... I’m a coffee pervert.’

‘Come early on a Saturday and you’ll be amazed. The road in front of the cafe is awash with cyclists aged from seven to 75’

Mobile sandwichboard

Coffee companies have long recognised the synergy between their product and cycling, and have used it for marketing. One such is the Saeco team which formed in 1996. Saeco is an Italian manufacturer of espresso machines and gained worldwide coverage through Mario Cipollini. When Cipollini didn’t have a toga draped over his shoulders at the Tour de France, he was racking up 12 individual stage victories, plus 42 at the Giro. Saeco merged with Lampre in 2005, forming Lampre-Caffita – the latter a capsule system for making espressos. Lampre–Merida is the current incarnation.

Colombia’s finest natural export (not *that* one) was paraded on a global stage by sponsorship of a professional team between 1985 and 1990, Cafe de Colombia. They ceased sponsorship in the year Colombian

climbing sensation Nairo Quintana was born (1990) but they’d already racked up numerous victories thanks to El Jardinero (the Little Gardner), aka Luis Herrera.

But it’s espresso coffee machine maker Faema that remains forever synonymous with professional cycling. The company recruited former Italian road champion Learco Guerra as directuer sportif, who set about creating a team of superstars. Rik Van Looy, the Classics King who won the World Champs twice plus eight Classics victories including Paris-Roubaix three times; Charly Gaul, the Angel of the Mountains, 1958 Tour winner and four-time mountain classification victor at the Tour and Giro; Federico Bahamontes, 1959 Tour victor and six-time Tour King of the Mountains; and, of course, The Cannibal, Eddy Merckx.

Merckx raced for Faema between 1968 and 1970. (In fact, his Faema career was nearly cut short after fellow caffeinated behemoths Coca-Cola offered him a million francs to race for them. He refused believing he wasn’t strong enough to race the Giro for Faema and the Tour for Coca-Cola.) In that time he helped himself and the espresso giants to two Tour triumphs, three Giros, Paris-Nice twice, Milan-San Remo, Tour of Flanders, Paris-Roubaix twice and Liege-Bastogne-Liege.

Faema and their red and white woollen cycle tops monopolised the memories of

combining his love of bikes and coffee. ‘I used to run four or five sandwich shops in Oxford city centre before focusing on one in Jericho that I really liked. My Mum and Dad passed away and my eldest son said, “Dad, why don’t you put up the cycling photos of you that mama hung in her home?” I thought that’s not a bad idea – it’ll add soul to the place. Well, within six months we’d formed a club and four years later we have 300 members.’

Zappi’s Cafe has now evolved to a new site in Oxford, run by ‘two Dans’. Zappi himself is still involved but much of his time is consumed by Zappi’s Racing Team, which focuses heavily on young riders. For 2014 the senior team will be entirely made up of riders born between 1994 and 1995. Zappi also coaches a flourishing youth team. But it’s the weekend club rides – and not the caffeine – that still cause his heart to miss a beat.

‘Come early on a Saturday morning and you’ll be amazed. The road in front of the cafe is awash with cyclists aged from seven to 75. They organize themselves on a Friday night over Facebook into groups of slow, medium and fast. It’s a sight that makes me proud.’

Weekend boost

Zappi’s gathering of merry men and women is a scene replicated across the land, a mug of hot delight/tar/milky goodness (delete as applicable) acting as the dangling carrot on a cold Sunday morn. With a slice of (ideally homemade) cake thrown in for good measure, of course.

‘We ride on Saturdays and Sundays over West Cumbria or inland to the Lake District,’ says Rob Hargreaves, secretary of Velo Club Cumbria. ‘Usually we’ll cover about 70 miles and a pit stop is an integral part of ▶

Making the perfect coffee involves using a lot of technical equipment, combined with huge amounts of time, knowledge and effort. No surprise, then, that it appeals to cyclists

COFFEE COMMENT

Cycling’s finest explain their perfect pit stop and performance kicks...

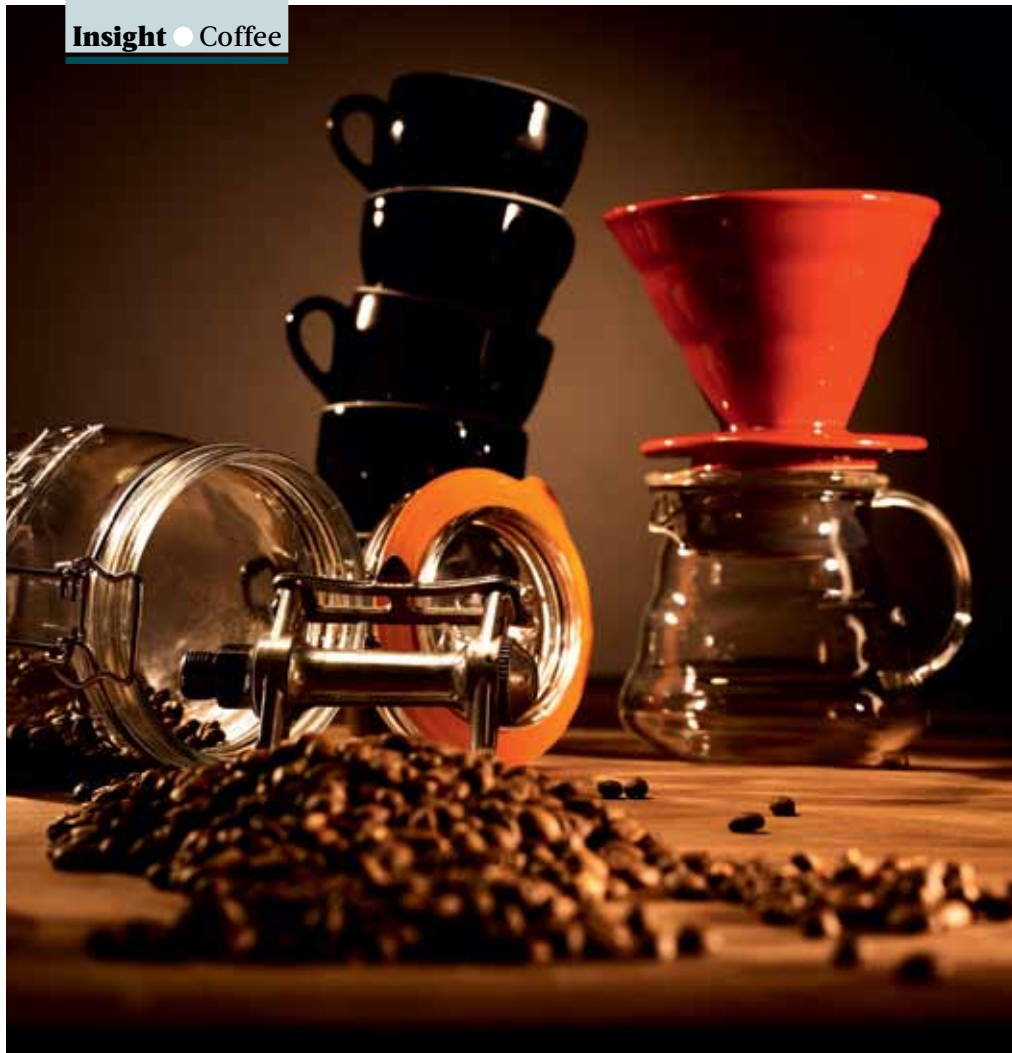
‘Coffee can improve one-day race performance but that means going cold turkey beforehand. You have to decide, is not drinking coffee for a few days really worth feeling pumped up come the event? I’m not so sure!’
MIKE CUMING, RAPHA RIDER

‘In Portugal there are many coffee shops of a high standard. And that’s because you have old baristas. They have the experience and take great pride in making a great espresso.’
FLAVIO ZAPPI, EX-PRO AND CAFE OWNER IN OXFORD

‘Caffeine during bike races tastes bad. That said, I often start crits with a bottle of Coke. I remember at the 2011 Richmond Grand Prix I was beginning to crack. Knocked back a Coke, felt good and sprinted to the win.’
ANDY TENNANT, PRO RIDER FOR MADISON-GENESIS

‘I regularly ride in Aviemore, Scotland, and they do seem to be very caffeine progressive. I also went on a charity ride in the Austrian Alps last year and the coffee was uniformly excellent.’
CHRIS BOARDMAN, EX-PRO AND BIKE MANUFACTURER





'A bloke comes in with a pedal-powered cinema. He brings along four bikes and a generator'

► the experience. If we hit the Lakes, we'll stop at a place in Keswick called The Filling Station. It used to be a garage but the owners weren't making money so they converted it into a cafe. I'll have an Americano. In the past I had a milky coffee but it just made me feel lethargic when remounting. Well, it was either that or the currant cake. It's delicious, though you often consume more calories than you burn off.'

Hargreaves says it wasn't always this way. Bygone years saw the club mimic the pros' harder training sets with anyone daring to stop for refreshment deemed soft. 'It was old school, hard, you had to keep going. Thankfully the social side's come back hand-in-hand with the coffee and cake.'

Head south and you'll come across Bool's Bicycles in Bristol. The owner, Daniel Bool, is a member of the Cycle Touring Club (CTC) and has racked up thousands of west-country miles. 'The most popular ride is a 40-mile round trip to Clevedon. It's the

same old routine. Get up, have porridge and a tea – coffee's too strong first thing – and then stop at Scarlett's halfway around. It's right by the pier, overlooking the Severn Channel and acts as a control stop for the Tasty Cheddar audax.'

Getting the fix

One man who has a greater affinity than most with coffee and cycling is Jim Varnish. Jim is father and former coach to Jess Varnish, the 23-year-old track cyclist who won European gold in the team sprint back in 2011. Jim also runs V-Sprint, an online cycle store and racing team. 'The most popular line in our range is the espresso mug and saucer,' says Varnish. 'The latter's designed in the shape of a velodrome with respective lines and curved bank (to catch any drops!).'

Varnish's favourite cafe is the Coffee Fix in Gatley, near Manchester. Coffee Fix began life as a small mobile cart trawling around summer festivals and entertaining corporate

clients. They soon grew roots, settling on a place that's the perfect spot for a ride-out to the Cheshire lanes or Peak District. It's also the two-wheeled equivalent of taking a stroll down Hollywood Boulevard. 'The GB track team are often here and Bradley Wiggins is a regular,' says Varnish. 'There's often about 50 grand's worth of Pinarellos lined up against the wall, which is pretty cool.'

Every cafe has its own character designed to make a caffeinated hit that bit more luxurious, nay ethereal. Most are receptive to the herd of Lycra clattering along tiled floors in search of a mid-ride boost, though it's good form to phone ahead and check Mrs Miggins is happy for 40 sweaty Neanderthals to descend on her dainty establishment.

'We often do,' says Varnish. 'It's something picked up from Europe. In Spain you'll call ahead and when you arrive they'll have tables all made up for you.'

Dark soul

One place that's new to the cycle cafe roster but is receptive to all-comers is Roll for the Soul in the centre of Bristol. Following the Mud Dock template it's a coffee shop come workshop but with a far more parochial flavour. 'We have a workshop upstairs for the bigger jobs, but for the smaller ones we'll do the repairs on the cafe floor,' says owner Rob Wall. 'It's about being different to the traditional bike shop, where they wheel your bike off to a back room, fix the problem, roll it back out and it's, "£50 thank you very much". We want an educational element so people can learn to repair their own bikes. It also gives the customers something to watch as they're drinking their coffee.'

In Wall's words, Roll for the Soul is a city-centre-based village hall. Though not always cycle specific, much of the extra entertainment they host centres on the bike. 'Some bloke comes in with a pedal-powered cinema,' says Wall. 'He brings along four bikes and hooks it up to a generator, all washed down with a cappuccino.'

Wall's project is the latest chapter in cycling's love affair with coffee – a romance that persists despite the rolling juggernaut of high-street coffee chains. The love is at times high profile – Magnus Backstedt's Big Maggy's and Lance Armstrong's Juan Pelota coffee shop – but founded on a democratic craving for the sight, smell and taste of a rehabilitative coffee. Where once milky coffee ruled the land, now we have cappuccino, latte, ristretto and the long black. Long live the coffee bean – the heart of every weekend ride. ☘

James Witts is a freelance writer who was more of a tea man, until now