

# My Love Affair

Text by Dr Daniel Fung

I was first introduced to her when I was in medical school. It started innocuously enough. My good friend told me she was a good companion for long study nights. She blended well among my books and her fragrance was invigorating. She tasted gorgeous and I was hooked. What started as innocent flirtation became a lifelong relationship. I am of course speaking of the beautiful yet ubiquitous brown bean called coffee.

My very first thoughts were: a few sips to burn the midnight oil – what harm would it do? But with each sip, I became more dependent on it to stay up for a few more hours. Before long, I was drinking every day and then it was several cups a day. Nowadays, I drink about five cups of coffee every day and I have attended two coffee seminars with a famous American coffee chain. What is it with this bean anyway?

## History of coffee

Coffee is one of the most highly consumed beverages in the world, perhaps only after water and tea. It has been reported that over 50 million cups are consumed every day. Historically, it has been described to have originated from Africa, although its exact origins are mired in myths rather than actual history. One such story is of a monk who found the berries of a coffee plant. After boiling and drinking it, the monk had boundless amounts of energy which kept him alert during long evening prayers. The cultivation and trading of coffee began in earnest in the Arabian Peninsula and by the 15th century, it was widely enjoyed and exotically called the “Wine of Araby”. Public coffee houses, or *qahveh-khaneh*, became common in many cities and were often referred to as “schools of the wise” because drinking coffee was associated with scintillating intellectual exchange. Coffee houses spread to Europe and then to the Americas by the mid-1600s. Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the US, has been quoted saying that coffee is the favourite drink of the civilised world.

Besides Africa, coffee plantations began to spread worldwide — the Dutch brought it to Indonesia and the French brought it to Central America. Today,

coffee is cultivated in over 70 countries but primarily in the equatorial regions of America, Asia and Africa. The two most commonly grown types of coffee are the highly prized Arabica beans and the less costly but hardier Robusta beans. Arabica beans need cooler highlands while Robusta beans can grow in almost any condition with a greater crop yield and double the amount of caffeine and antioxidants. Most of our local coffees, including instant coffee, are from Robusta beans which have high acidity and bitterness levels. Arabica beans, which originated from the southwestern highland forests of Ethiopia, are almost exclusively used in gourmet coffee.

## How to enjoy coffee without guilt

Drinking coffee is like wine tasting; it can be an experience rather than just a quick fix. For those who prefer quick fixes, a small espresso cup of the finest Arabica beans is an elegant alternative. There are actually people — called “cuppers” — who specialise in coffee tasting. For the rest of us, it’s best to enjoy coffee by considering its qualities which can be divided into three main elements: aroma, taste and body.

*Aroma* refers to the smell of the coffee. Various descriptions have been given to these aromas, such as earthy/ medicinal, chocolate-like/nutty, floral/

sweet and fruity/citrusy. The next time you pick up a cup of coffee, take in the scents before you take a sip.

*Taste* refers to how the coffee feels as it touches your taste buds. The most obvious is acidity, which can be described as the sharpness of the coffee taste. In addition, you will also find bitterness, often associated with the roasting process, and this is often followed by sweetness and other tastes. To fully enjoy coffee, take a sip by slurping it in (which causes one to spray the tongue with the drink) and enjoy the tastes that it creates. Swoosh it within the mouth so that it covers all the taste buds. As doctors, we all know how taste buds in the front of the mouth recognise sweetness followed by saltiness and sourness. Right at the back are the taste buds that recognise bitterness.

*Body* is described as the feel of the coffee as it enters your mouth. It is the viscosity and richness of the coffee (without milk or sugar) as it moves inside your mouth. Body is affected by the brewing method. Drip or filter brewing produces a lighter body, while using a French press or espresso machine (like the types you see in coffee houses) gives a heavier body as it captures the essential oils within the coffee.

I used to drink coffee with milk and sugar. In fact, hazelnut latte was my



favourite drink until I attended a course that taught me to try coffee in all its nakedness, which if you are a whisky drinker, means “straight”. I have also learned to pair my coffee to enjoy the experience. Pairing black Arabica coffee is an art and you need to know the three qualities of the coffee in order to pair it better. Here is a simple guide. First, identify the taste of your coffee and look for foods that can complement it. For example, sweet cake will complement a coffee that is acidic. Milder and less acidic coffees will go better with lighter foods such as fruits. Savoury foods tend to go better with more earthy coffee blends. My breakfast usually consists of an apple and a French roast (without milk or sugar). I find that this combination is a good way to start the day. However, don’t take my word for it – try pairing different foods with your coffee.

### The medical benefits (and risks) of coffee

A simple PubMed search on coffee will generate more than 11,000 entries. If you narrow it down to reviews, there are over 1,000 entries. Coffee has been purported to have many benefits as well as a number of risks. In 1991, the International Agency for Research on Cancer listed coffee as possibly carcinogenic in relation to bladder, pancreatic and ovarian cancer. Recently, evidence has been deemed inadequate and other reviews suggest that it lowers the risk of skin cancer. A recent review in the open access journal *Molecules* looks at 26 published intervention studies and suggests that long term coffee consumption (rather than the odd cup) produces an increase in glutathione (an important

blood antioxidant) levels and reduces DNA damage. The authors also suggest possible long-term benefits against chronic metabolic and cardiovascular disease, as well as a reduction of the risk of stroke. Another review suggested that coffee consumption may reduce the incidence of gout, although its effects on hyperuricemia are less clear. One review suggests that more than two cups of coffee a day can reduce the risk of liver fibrosis, cirrhosis and even cancer. Even some dentists are suggesting that coffee provides some potential dental health benefits. Interestingly, its benefits on mental health are questionable, with several reviews suggesting its association with depression and the risks of dependence. It does appear to assist in reducing cognitive decline with age.

I would probably propose a balanced approach to coffee which suggests that, when taken in moderation, it can be part of a healthy diet, and an excellent start and end to a wonderful day. Bon appétit! ♦

Dr Daniel Fung is an avid drinker of coffee, an interest he shares with his wife, Joyce, and their five grown-up kids. He still helps to top up their Starbucks card and hopes to introduce this drinking passion to future generations of the *fung-mily*. The rest of his time is spent in his work as Chairman Medical Board at the Institute of Mental Health.

