

The Quest for the Coolest Cold Coffee

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The quest for flavorful, cold coffee ends in San Francisco, where roasters and coffee companies have cracked the code on refreshing, chilled brew. Since its inception, when preparing iced coffee, it has been challenging to harness that same rich flavor found in hot coffee. It requires a ratio with a delicate balance of coffee-to-water (or in some cases, ice); using too much coffee when preparing it could result in a startlingly-strong cup of coffee, while too much water could weaken the flavor. Because cold brew also requires that coffee be served cold, it can require longer exposure to air to cool. This increased oxidation can result in a coffee that tastes “off,” that’s missing some of the aromatics and flavors that once were present when it was hot.

In June of 2017, San Francisco-based Four Barrel Coffee published a blog post lauding its new “not-cold-brew” coffee. The coffee is extracted hot and then cooled “without the intrusion of oxygen and other funky stuff.”

Intrigued, I scheduled a visit to try it. Admittedly, I don’t like cold-brew coffee. With cold brew, gone are the floral and darker cocoa notes that you’ll taste in my preferred hot coffees.

I met with Keven Mowen, Four Barrel’s wholesale account manager, at the Valencia Street cafe, eager to finally see if its “cold coffee” could change my perspective on cold brew. But, he was quick to distance Four Barrel’s cold coffee from others. “It’s actually cold, hot coffee, not cold brew,” he said. He compared cold brew to darkly roasted coffee. “Similarly with dark-roast coffee, it is hard to differentiate between a high-quality and low-quality product with cold-brewed coffee,” said Mowen. “Sourcing and paying for high-quality product in cold brew just doesn’t make sense. Cold-brew coffee has exploded because it’s cheap [to produce].”

In contrast, he said that Four Barrel highlights some of its most expensive coffee beans with its proprietary, patent-pending “cold coffee” method. Many coffee shops make cold brew as a way to turn a profit on stale or cheap coffee beans. Instead, according to Mowen, Four Barrel roasts the same coffee bean two ways to highlight contrasting coffee notes in its cold coffee. Then, with the separate roasts, Four Barrel brews two variations of the same coffee with different grind levels. These are flash-chilled and then joined together in a keg.

During the ideation process, Four Barrel brewmaster Brett Whitman consulted several beer professionals. While Four Barrel is secretive as to which mechanisms it uses to brew and chill its cold coffee, the method it uses resembles flash-chilling, a common practice in the craft beer world. After fermentation, craft brewers will “cold crash” their brew to drop it to near-freezing temperatures, then often deposit it directly into kegs to combat oxidation. Similarly, Four Barrel engineered a process to drop hot brewed coffee from 200 degrees Fahrenheit to around 40 degrees Fahrenheit in approximately 10 seconds. This, combined with an oxygen-free brewing environment and nitrogen kegging, preserves volatile aromatics and acids that cold-brew coffees cannot. “Crashing it to that temp so quickly slows many of the processes that can negatively affect the flavor of coffee,” said Whitman.

With this process, the Four Barrel team is able to eliminate any further contact with oxygen, creating a shelf-stable keg of coffee that is good for up to six months, if kept refrigerated. The output is a single-origin coffee that highlights the coffee fruit’s brighter and deeper flavors. While the cold coffee is available through a few wholesale accounts and at the three cafes, Four Barrel has its eyes on canning for direct-to-consumer sales.

Four Barrel isn’t the only San Francisco coffee company competing for the best cold coffee. It took coffee giant Blue Bottle Coffee Company six years of research and development to perfect its portable New Orleans Iced Coffee (called NOLA) and canned cold brew. Blue Bottle relies on a Toddy-style, cold-brewing method, as does Verve Coffee Roasters, which also serves batch-brewed, kegged, and canned coffees.

“The goal is to manage all of the variables (temperature, time, pressure, water quality, grind, roast, and coffee-growing region) and to manipulate them in a way that reaches a desired flavor goal,” said Colby Bar, Verve Coffee co-founder. “What works well for one coffee blend may not work for another. It’s a lot like dialing in espresso or how we approach our roast curves. The process needs to be flexible in the beginning, but once a desired flavor profile is attained, it should remain consistent and repeatable.”

With all of the extra work, time, and resources the process takes, it’s surprising that cafes and roasters continue to offer cold brew and iced coffee. But, for most, it’s a way to expand their reach to customers outside of the San Francisco Bay Area and the physical footprint of the cafe. Cold coffee enables brewers to can or bottle their product for wider distribution. Blue Bottle has already done so, and Four Barrel has future plans to can its cold coffee for nationwide retail sales.

“The future of cold coffee is quality and convenience,” said Bar. “The quality has risen tremendously, as have the options. Consumer awareness is following suit, as I see more and more people grabbing canned and bottled cold brew from grocery store shelves. We are seeing the sales of kegged cold brew increasing in our cafes. I’m sure we will see additional high-end brands launch cold-coffee products, distribution widen, and more innovative and niche cold-coffee products enter the market.”