

Coffee: the Lawyers' Elixir

by Evan Loeffler

The four food groups for the young attorney are the ABCs: Accounts receivable, Billable hours, Clients, and Coffee. The first three items receive much more attention in lawyers' journals than the last. There are numerous resources for those who wish to learn more about how to cultivate, exploit, and generally take advantage of the first three, leaving the last curiously undiscussed.

Prior to law school, coffee was not my beverage of choice. I attended a very liberal college which required neither wakeful attendance in class nor meaningless acts of bravado such as drinking something wholly unpalatable. The level of attentiveness required to discern any intelligent thought from the meandering lectures delivered by tenured professors in law school, however, necessitated a switch to a stronger drink.

As a lawyer, I have found that the staggering amount of time I have had to spend in the law library demanded an increasing dependence on something to keep me awake and moderately alert. Further, I have found that drinking large amounts of coffee gives me a valid excuse to shuck my chains and leave my office, albeit only to go to the restroom, and then only for a few minutes.

Coffee is an acquired taste. To the uninitiated, the flavor of coffee can best be described as "bitter." Regular coffee drinkers add colorful descriptive words to this characterization. Terms such as "too damned bitter" and "undrinkably bitter" are not uncommon or inaccurate. Experimentation and patience, however, reveal that beneath the initial bitterness of coffee there are many subtle nuances and aftertastes. The Coffee Drinkers Society officially recognizes three such flavors: acidity, tartness and piquancy--all synonymous with "bitter."

In an effort to make coffee more palatable, there are a variety of additives people can put in their coffee to subtly alter, augment, or entirely change its flavor. These include sugar, artificial sugar, milk, and artificial milk, also known as "non-dairy creamer" or "coffee toner." (Note: "Coffee Mate" a brand of non-dairy creamer does not reproduce or breed with coffee. This is false advertising on the part of the Coffee Mate people.) It has become stylish lately to add flavored syrups to coffee to change the flavor so much the drinker might as well be drinking something else. Favorite varieties of syrup are "hazelnut," "creme de menthe," and "french vanilla." My own particular favorites are "martini" and "halibut."

Naturally, there are coffee purists who insist that coffee can only be properly enjoyed black. They refer to coffee additives as "pollution" and proudly swill coffee in its natural state. These individuals are best recognized by their stained teeth and high blood pressure. Also, since their taste buds have been numbed by years of soaking them in scalding bitterness, these people generally cannot tell the difference between tomato and apple juice except by sight.

Coffee can be prepared in varying strengths. The degrees range from "STRONG" which can be used to start a person's heart in the event a defibrillator is not readily available, to "weak" which is hot water in the same room as a cup of coffee, to "tea" which is not coffee at all but deserves mention as a viable alternative.

The most common method of preparing coffee is the "automatic drip." A machine is used to squirt hot water onto coffee grounds held in a paper filter cone. This method makes the most consistently weak cup of coffee, which insures palatability. The "French press" method steeps coffee grounds in hot water and strains most of them out using a metal-screened plunger. This method makes more flavorful coffee and has the added advantage of texture, namely the coffee grounds now stuck to your teeth. The "Toddy" brewing method creates a concentrated coffee liquor by soaking coffee grounds in cold water for days. This is extremely cruel, but makes for the least bitter coffee drink. Finally, there is the "Espresso" method in which coffee is ground to dust, brutally packed into a high-pressured container, and then melted. Some people insist that the best way to enjoy espresso is to watch other people drink it.

A friend of mine has been trying to convince me to quit drinking coffee. She tells me it is neither required nor healthy for a young lawyer to spend twenty hours a day in the office, and has provided me with stacks of scientific data describing how coffee sucks all the nutrients from your body. I have pointed out to her that she is an estate planning and probate attorney, and that all her clients are either dead or too old to care whether their lawyer is actively working on their case, so her situation does not count. She remains adamant.

"Coffee is bad for you!" she cries. "I'll bet you can't name a single good thing that coffee does for you."

"I could name at least five things," I answer. "But I'd have to number them on my fingers and they're shaking too much from all the caffeine coursing through my system."

At my friend's request I have cut my coffee intake down to a mere four cups a day, and have trained myself not drink any after dinner to insure that I get some sleep. This has, I admit, improved my productivity in that my handwriting no longer appears to have been written by someone with palsy, and I can sit still without squirming. I am not willing, however, to completely quit drinking coffee. I fear my social life would dwindle to zero if I stopped frequenting the local Starbucks.