

Camp Coffee

Morning simply isn't morning without a cup of coffee, but not just any cup will do. I want mine freshly brewed with clean cold water and served in a ceramic mug of substance -- not a plastic cup and, please, not one of Styrofoam -- and I want it black and strong enough to kick-start me into wakefulness.

It's no accident, I think, that a cup of coffee is approximately the size and temperature of a human heart. Though it does not beat with life, it steams and radiates and arouses the senses with its scintillating aroma, its flavor, its warmth. We hunch over it seeking comfort and affirmation, our hands clasping it to absorb the heat. It's a poor substitute for love, grace, talent, and good looks, but a hot cup of coffee is a satisfying thing to hold onto early in the morning, while the chill of night remains in your bones and you're not yet ready to face the responsibilities of daytime.

Coffee is such a common ingredient of our daily routines that it's hard to imagine life without it. Yet until the seventeenth century it was unknown in Europe and confined only to northern Africa and the Arab world. The coffee plant was found originally only in Ethiopia, and our word for it comes from the Turkish, kahve, and the Arabic, qahwah. When traders brought the brew to Europe, Christians were wary of its stimulatory qualities and declared it an invention of the devil. Then Pope Clement VIII tried a cup and liked the brew so much that he baptized it, and the Western world has been on a caffeine jag ever since.

No doubt coffee was brewed outside over open fires for centuries before it found its way into the posh coffeehouses of Vienna and Paris. Indoors or out, it can be percolated, drip brewed, steamed, slow filtered -- there are many ways to make it, and you're wise to remain open to procedures ancient and new. Years ago I learned one method for brewing from an ancient, shrunken man who had spent most of his life working as a timber cutter in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. One morning I stopped by to visit and watched him fill a fire-blackened pot with water and set it on a grill over an open fire in the yard. The moment the water reached the boiling point, he scooped a generous handful of Maxwell House from a can, threw it in the pot, and slammed the lid over it. In a few moments the pot trembled, the lid rattled loose, and liquid and grounds spilled over the sides into the fire, giving off steaming clouds of aroma. Using his slouch hat for a pot holder, he lifted the pot off the fire and dropped a broken eggshell inside to settle the grounds. I accepted a cup with doubts. It was as thick and dark as silt at the bottom of a pond. I took a tentative sip, expecting my stomach to clench against the bitterness. But it was good.

Delicious, in fact. I had several cups.

The experts say bitter flavor is usually the result of too much boiling, which releases tannin and makes the coffee acidic. To avoid bitterness in a percolator, remove it from the fire a minute or two after it starts to boil, then pour a tablespoon of cold water down the spout to clear the grounds. Better yet, use the below-boiling method: Bring water to the boiling point, remove it from the fire to cool for a few moments, then pour it over ground coffee in a filtered drip pot.

Connoisseurs might choose to bring along a portable coffee grinder (on the market now is a backpacker's model that weighs just five ounces and

fits in a shirt pocket) and an espresso maker for use on a camp stove. The one I've seen weighs seven ounces and can make a three-ounce cuplet of espresso in ninety seconds. With a bag of roasted Kona Kai beans and a pint of cream you can whip up a brew that makes you think you're back home in your neighborhood Starbucks.

But you don't need to be that fussy. Outdoors, on a cold morning, even a pretty bad cup of coffee tastes pretty good. Tom Carney and I once spent two days riding horses through the North Dakota badlands in the company of a pair of cowboys. They were the genuine article, bow legged and tobacco-chewing, raised on cattle ranches as big as counties, where they had learned the cowboy skills of horsemanship, fence mending, cattle branding, and, of course, coffee making. At night we slept on the ground beneath the stars, and in the morning woke to the scent of frying bacon and eggs. Tom and I got out of our sleeping bags, groaning with aching muscles, and went looking for coffee.

One of the cowboys handed us Styrofoam cups, plastic spoons, and a small jar of instant Folgers, then pointed at a pot of water simmering on the camp stove. When we hesitated, the cowboy took a noisy slurp from his own Styrofoam cup, squinted at us through the steam, and said, in a voice that sounded as if it had been dragged all night behind a horse, "Now that, mister, is a damned good cup of coffee."

I stirred up a cup and tried a sip. It wasn't Jamaica Blue Mountain, but it wasn't bad. Not bad at all.

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