INDUSTRY TAKES A SEAT AT THE COFFEE TABLE
Debate explores the key ingredient in quality coffee

LAST MONTH at The London Coffee Festival we sat the coffee industry’s most influential people around a coffee table to debate the effect water quality can have on a cup of coffee.

We know the UK is in the midst of a coffee boom and savvy consumers are always looking for the best taste and drinking experience. Baristas, roasters and suppliers at the forefront of speciality coffee are constantly striving for better beans, roasts and machines and are starting to recognise that water is one of the most important ingredients. After all, it makes up 98% of any black coffee. So we thought we’d get the inside track and views on this vital ingredient from those in the know.

We posed the hottest topics covering everything from industry awareness on the impact of water, how it can be improved, who’s responsible and what the future looks like. Over a cup of freshly brewed filter coffee, provided by Lavazza, our guests voiced some interesting ideas and aired some passionate differences of opinion.

First up we asked just how aware is the industry of this vital ingredient? David Cormack, head of training, Lavazza kicked off by sharing his

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experience of typical business priorities: “Most new businesses start off with the best intentions. They’ve got this fantastic machine and think about the water. But as business develops water slips down the list - then something goes wrong and where people have failed is water. People say the base of a great coffee is espresso, but what they’re missing is that the base of that is water.”

Adding to this view, Martyn Herriott, chairman, Beverage Standards Association (BSA) said: “Cafés and restaurants often have a very black and white approach. Many don’t understand the impact water has on the drink. Some operators go down the whole road to make sure their machine and water will produce the best coffee, others don’t.”

Looking at general industry awareness, Carl Bjorkstrand, managing director, Cimbali shared his view saying: “People see water as a bringer of scale and as a negative. The perception needs to change to see it as a benefit and part of the taste, not just a cost.” Simon Stenning, foodservice strategy director, Allegra added “those at the forefront of coffee are paying lots of attention to every element.”

WATER QUALITY WHO’S RESPONSIBLE?

The debate moved to the issue of whose responsibility it is to look after water quality, with some conflicting opinions from guests around the table. Louie Salvoni, managing director, Espresso Services pointed the finger at roasters rather than equipment suppliers who he felt weren’t doing their part, “coffee roasters should be standing up front. They’re talking about how great their coffee is but we need them to stand there and say if you don’t use filtered water it will be detrimental to the taste.”

Disagreeing with this opinion, Gary Norwood, business account manager, BRITA professional highlighted the need for water to be incorporated in the complete coffee package, noting: “most salesmen sell coffee, a machine, service package and training but should be talking about water too.”

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Recent research commissioned by BRITA Professional found that 8 out of 10 consumers preferred coffee made with BRITA. Speaking of the findings, Faye Clothier, deputy sales director said: “the consumer ultimately makes the choice of where to purchase coffee so water quality could be driven by them.” However, Louie Salvoni, Espresso Systems raised the question of relevant marketing and the need to tell consumers if coffee was made with BRITA or not.

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Daniel Sait, editor, Essential Café highlighted the danger of a widespread lack of education explaining that although “all the evidence and science is there, water is often seen as another thing the operator has to buy.” He concluded that although “we have good quality coffee around the UK and Europe we must make consumers more aware or it’ll bring the whole industry down.”

David Cormack shared the challenge Lavazza faces on water education as a large roaster as they can’t always know where their coffee ends up. Speaking of the education they deliver through 50 training centres around the world he said: “while we can preach the message on water, only 40-50% of our customers would hear it”, although they are including water in training for the first time.

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Behind the Beans

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All guests were in agreement that there needs to be a widespread education campaign to bring the whole market forward. However, how this will happen will be the biggest challenge.

Simon Stenning, Allegra, put the onus straight on the leading baristas as this is sure to “trickle down to consumers as they become more aware of water as a constituent part”, while Louie Salvoni, Espresso Services suggested the media should play more of a role.

Moving on to the challenges holding the industry back, Martyn Herriott highlighted one of the main barriers to improved quality as “not getting the water filter put in, it’s getting the customer to change them.” Simon Stenning, said “You need the filtration for cleaner machines. But where’s the carrot? Where’s the incentive to have better water for a better drink?”

The next question then looked to the future and what’s happening to our water and the impact it will have on coffee quality. Louie Salvoni shared his past experience saying he “used to be certain on the quality of the water. For example, if you went to Dover, you knew you’d have a problem with chalk. The regions have changed so it’s even more important to have water filters everywhere.” Carl Bjorkstrand agreed that water has become more variable sharing Cimbali’s UK water survey where hundreds of filters were adjusted as the water had changed since installation.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE

With the industry in agreement that water quality is becoming more variable and more of a risk, the debate finished by looking at how important water will be in the future of coffee. Martyn Herriott explained how water filtration is central to the ethos of The Beverage Standards Association and agreed it needs to be more of a focus in the future. By doing this “customers would benefit, engineers would benefit, we would all benefit.”

With the debate at an end but with many more issues to be discussed, Anthony Spruce, BRITA Professional, summed up saying, “There’s certainly a willingness to raise standards and talk about this issue. We want to be a member of the coffee community and for people to see us as just some technical solution. We’re always innovating for better water to improve the quality of coffee and other hot beverages in an industry that will continue to be driven by taste and drinking experience.”

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DRIVING COFFEE QUALITY

At BRITA Professional we can help you get the quality of your water right to help you create the perfect cup of coffee. To find out more about how we can help your reputation and bottom line visit www.brita.co.uk/professional or call 0844 742 4990.