

Crema

Of the crop

Mary-Jane Daffy meets Melbourne's coffee kings

It's almost clinical. Hip young things wearing crisp white lab coats lean forward earnestly. They hold wooden stirrers flecked with coffee, their eyes fixed on the glass vessel that gently gurgles its way through the brewing process. Unperturbed by the din of shoppers clutching their loot of mid-year sales, the baristas (or are they coffee technicians?) behind the counter at Sensory Lab are riding the newest wave of coffee sensation to steam its way into Melbourne. It's an experience.

Tiny tubes of perfume are waved under customers' noses before a flavour profile is chosen and matched by a coffee that embodies the sensory elements of the chosen aroma. The resulting dark liquid is created without the help of the classic espresso machine that consumers are comfortable with. Rather, it's made using a double glass bubble vessel that fell out of favour in the 1960s, only to make a surprising resurgence in the late '90s – the siphon coffee maker.

Be it for the show it provides, attempting to weed out the subtle characteristics of elderflower, honey or lemon from a cup of coffee, or simply following a fad, speciality coffee has piqued Melburnians' interest. But not everyone is convinced.

Those weaned on the thick espresso crema of roast blends introduced by the Italians in the '50s and '60s can be likened to one-eyed Collingwood supporters: unwavering in their beliefs.

Domenico Crivelli is one of them. This year Crivelli celebrates 50 years in the coffee industry and was one of the driving forces in delivering espresso coffee and blended roasts to Melbourne. Seated alongside his son Dino in Dino's Camberwell roasting store, Coffee Max, it's evident the many years in the industry have not tarnished Crivelli's passion. He's animated when he speaks and there's an understanding that producing quality coffee isn't just a job, but a commitment.

"There's not much good coffee out there. It's sad, but you can't drink it," he says, sipping the sheen from the top of his coffee. "You can drink single-origin but it's not perfect. You can't get the same taste profile out of a single-origin as opposed to what you can get with a blend. It's a combination of all the different beans which creates the optimum taste."

Crivelli launched Coffex Coffee in Coburg with his father in 1958 after a hiatus in Italy, where he spent time with a coffee roaster. At the time, the coffee being introduced to Melbourne was made up of a blend of beans sourced from around the world and was often rich with robusta, known for its high caffeine content and bitter flavour. Melbourne's coffee culture was



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non-existent and for many Italian migrants becoming a coffee roaster was a process of trial and error.

"In the coffee industry you have to put all your love and your care into what you're doing," Crivelli explains in his thick Italian accent. "I can tell you to make that blend I put 20 per cent Costa Rica bean, 10 per cent Peru, 20 per cent Guatemala and so on. But that's not all of it because you have to know when to buy the coffee, where to buy it, how long you've got to keep it, and the way you roast it, the way you handle it. I could tell you the truth but if you don't know, you can ruin it as you roast it. It's something you just have to learn."

Crivelli's son Dino has followed in his father's footsteps. A third-generation coffee roaster, Dino launched his own coffee label, Coffee Max, after his father sold the family business in 1995. He has since expanded his own business, opening a second store in Doncaster. "He was born into the industry, there's no two ways about it," Crivelli states, looking proudly at his son.

Dino nods in agreement. "I remember school holidays and Dad would say 'oh no mate, get in the car and come to work'. There was no escaping it and at the time I wanted to hang out with my mates, but I always returned to it."

The duo has experienced a significant shift in Melbourne's coffee culture. Australia was, up until Italian immigration, a largely tea-drinking nation, with only a minority reaching for the insipid instant coffee available in the market. But with the introduction of espresso coffee came a gradual shift in attitudes. "When I opened, it was about 95 per cent Italian coffee drinkers and 5 per cent Australian. Now it's the opposite, and the Australians, they tell you if the coffee is good or not. It's changed," Crivelli says.

"When Dad first opened he only served blended coffee roasts. Now, 80 per cent of my coffees are blends and two of them single origins," Dino says. "I believe you get a more rounded flavour from the blend, but the consumers are asking for single-origin."

Salvatore Malatesta, owner of dedicated coffee cafes such as Sensory Lab in the CBD, St Ali in South Melbourne and Outpost in South Yarra, has been hailed as introducing a "third-wave" coffee movement to Melbourne and becoming a mouthpiece for single-origin coffee. Usually sourced from just one geographical region and sometimes from just one coffee plantation, single-origin coffee is popular with consumers looking for a very specific taste.

"The work we do focuses on treating coffee like wine, with the spotlight on single-origin, single-estate and micro-lot coffees (sourced from a single field on a farm)," Malatesta says. "Our focus is on seasonality and never forgetting that coffee is a fruit. We have roast dates, not use-by dates on our coffee. We have pioneered some alternative brewing methods and have focused on customer education."

Giancarlo Giusti, one of Melbourne's most charismatic coffee roasters, fondly recalls the importance of educating the customer in the '60s when he and business partner Rino Benassi opened Grinders Coffee in Carlton. He sold the business in 2005, but Giusti is still a regular fixture in the original store.

"Coffee was in the hands of the Italians," Giusti explains, running his hands along the basket handles cradling the many varieties of coffee beans. "You had people you had to, not educate, but explain, and I was willing. When I first opened, most customers were Italian. From the '80s onward other nationalities came along and I started explaining to them how I roast, how to drink, how to make."

Giusti arrived in Australia in 1960 and immediately moved to Carlton, then the hub of the Italian community. Unlike the overabundance of cafes littered throughout Melbourne today, Giusti remembers only three or four in the Carlton area. "They were all Italians. But if you went to a shop that wasn't Italian, the espresso wasn't there," he says. "The coffee bars then were not for the normal people because they would say it was where the nasty people were, you know. It could be true, could not be true, I don't want to say. They did a lot anyway for developing the espresso coffee."

Just prior to opening Grinders Coffee, Giusti worked selling coffee for Mocopan, one of Melbourne's first coffee houses. It was there that he realised there was a gap in the market. "I was selling and improving the coffee," he admits. "Selling to the restaurants and cafes, and I say, why shouldn't I open a shop, just coffee, like we have in Italy."

His first roasting machine was bought in '71 and was "a small one" with a roasting capacity of 15 kilograms. Slowly demand increased and Giusti was forced to take his roasting facilities away from his modest shopfront in Lygon Street. "I knew Melbourne's coffee scene would progress," Giusti says. "I could tell by how much I was roasting. Every year the demand was growing."

While the culture around coffee has shifted, it would be remiss to forget how far it's evolved in such a short time. "Giancarlo and Domenico, and even guys like Peter Bancroft and the DiMattinas, were pioneering whole beans and ground coffee in a market that was dominated by tea or inferior soluble instant coffees," Malatesta says. "They were incredibly influential."

Giusti is adamant that he is not a renegade, downplaying his role in the rise of coffee culture. "We have a saying in Italian: 'When the water touch your bum, you learn to swim.' When you are in business you learn, you move," the 80-year-old says, smiling. "I came to Australia because I wanted to improve my life, and thank God I did it. I'm not luckier than anybody else. Everybody has the chance to do something. I had it, I took it."

With Malatesta hinting at a fourth wave coffee movement, where brewing methods and quality machinery become opinion makers, coffee fanaticism appears only to be gathering speed. So can we expect to see the espresso machine packed up to make room for such equipment as Uber Boilers and Bunn Trifectas, and blends replaced by single-origin coffee?

Unlikely. Not while roasters like Crivelli continue to produce and develop quality coffee and bring the same conviction to espresso coffee he had 50 years ago.

"In life you have to love what you're doing," he says, leaning forward over his coffee. "If you don't love what you're doing you're not getting anywhere. I love coffee." ■



Domenico Crivelli



Giancarlo Giusti with Rita Erlich in his Carlton shop in 1989

Bean there, drunk that
coffee's new tamping grounds

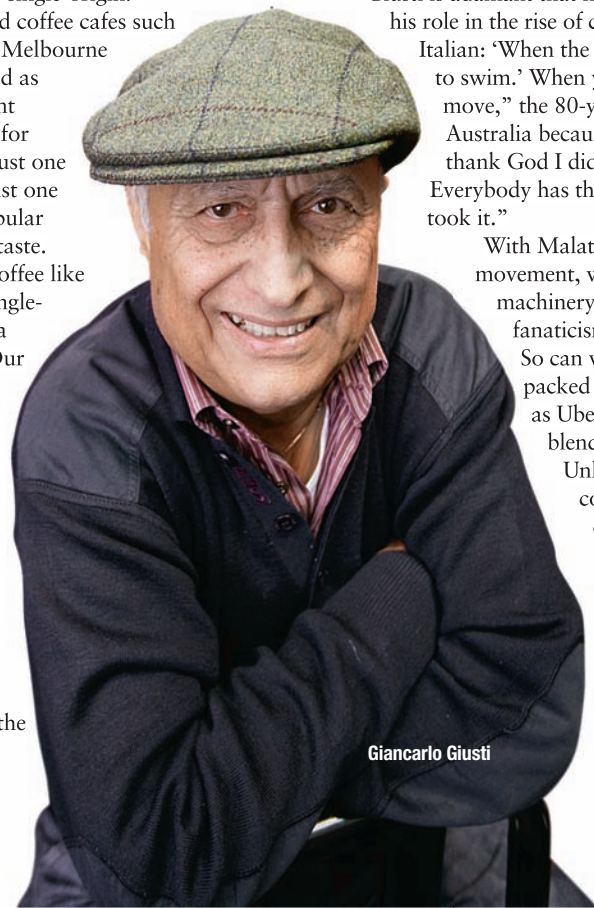
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Call 9643 2222 visit sensorylab.com.au

Coffee Max Camberwell
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Call 9813 0111

Coffee Max Westfield Doncaster
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Call 9848 1114 visit coffeemax.com.au

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