

Published in Sauce Magazine, March 2007

Sweet Endings

Pair dessert with the right coffee for a perfect finish

By Lisa Lance



Even if you're not a sommelier, you probably know the general rules for pairing wine with food. You may even have a preference for certain wine varietals or growing regions. But when dessert time rolls around, what do you drink? Do you order an espresso with your chocolate torte? Or a cup of French roast with your blackberry soufflé? The right wine can bring out the best in your entrée, and vice versa, and the same is true for coffee and dessert.

Coffee varieties span a range of taste profiles and characteristics. Some factors affecting taste include a bean's growing region—including the elevation and the soil—the way it's processed before it gets to the roaster and the way it's roasted. "The more you roast coffee, the more you roast out acidity, and it has a huge effect on the flavor," said Alex McCracken, director of barista training and coffee education at Kaldi's Coffee Roasting Company in St. Louis.

But how does the average coffee drinker know what to look for? Rick Milton, owner of St. Louis-based Northwest Coffee Roasting Co., described the flavor profiles of different roasts of coffee as a spectrum from light to dark. Lighter roast coffees have a higher acidity and sharp, fruity flavors. Darker roast coffees are more full-bodied, mellow and have a broader flavor, "like one taste all the way through," he said.

The origin of the beans is a good place to start in determining the appropriate roast. Milton said beans from African countries such as Ethiopia call for a lighter roast. A medium roast coffee, such as the Northwest Coffee's Full City roast, would use beans from Latin American and Indonesian countries like Guatemala and Papua New Guinea. Beans for the darkest roasts, such as French roast coffee, come from different countries in some of the same regions as the medium roasts, specifically Columbia and Sumatra.

Kaldi's founders Suzanne Langlois and Howard Lerner suggested setting up a "coffee flight" tasting session at home to become familiar with the taste profiles of different coffees. Similar to a wine flight served with small plates or appetizers, several coffees can be served with a dessert sampling. "The differences in coffees are vast and pronounced," Langlois said, "especially when sipped side by side."

What desserts taste best with each type of coffee? Milton said that lighter roasts of coffee work best with light, fruity desserts such as Key lime pie and fruit tortes. Fruit plates and sorbets would also be good to pair with lighter coffees because of the similarities in acidic flavors.

Medium-roast coffees would go well with heavier, but not too rich, desserts. Pastries, crème brûlée and pumpkin pie would all pair well with the mellow flavor of a medium roast.

The darkest roasts of coffee pair best with heavier desserts: chocolates, ice cream and heavy cakes. Milton said his ideal ending to an evening meal would be a cup of French roast coffee, a glass of red wine and some chocolates.

What if you want something other than straight coffee? “Lattes are a great choice of drink when serving cookies to adults, simply because cookies and milk go so well together,” said Langlois. But the latte should be kept small, she added, because “a 20-ounce latte has no place at the dessert table.” She suggested keeping the drink at 6 to 8 ounces.

Shannon McGinn, co-owner of Hartford Coffee Company in the South Grand neighborhood, feels that specialty coffee drinks are desserts in themselves. “I think for most of the people that like to order [coffee drinks], to have a big, enormous, heavy, super rich dessert is just overload,” she said. “It’s just too much.”

McGinn said her customers enjoy small, portable desserts with their coffee. “Because I was a big baker,” she said, “I used to make, every day, mocha cheesecakes and tortes and big fancy desserts and learned really quickly that people just want cookies.” The company promptly shifted the focus of its offerings to house-made scones, bars, cookies and brownies.

Dennis Ward, manager of Cyrano’s in Webster Groves, recommended either a coffee drink very similar in flavor to the chosen dessert or one that complements it. Because the restaurant gets a lot of late-night business, customers often order coffee-and-alcohol drinks, which he said pair well with desserts containing alcohol as an ingredient. He suggested pairing the restaurant’s Caramel Brioche Bread Pudding, which is served in a cherry bourbon sauce, with an Irish coffee (Irish whiskey, sugar and coffee served with whipped cream).

Not sure if you want a drink or dessert at the end of your meal? Atlas Restaurant in the Central West End offers two options for the undecided. Co-owner Jean Donnelly said many customers will order an espresso martini instead of dessert. Atlas’ is a blend of Stoli Vanil, Starbucks coffee liqueur and a shot of espresso. The restaurant also offers an *affogato* - a shot of hot espresso poured over vanilla ice cream.

As you become familiar with the taste profiles of different coffees, you'll discover what coffee and dessert combinations work best. "It truly is all about becoming familiar with your desserts and becoming familiar with the coffees," said Andrew Timko, director of coffee at Kaldi's. "Try it, try an African coffee, try a Central American coffee, try a South American coffee and then try a dark roast and compare them."

When sampling different types of coffees and desserts, seek out taste components that complement each other. Notice how certain flavors in the coffee can either enhance or compete with the flavors in each dessert. "That's why you pair things," Timko said. "That's why you pair wine with food, that's why we're pairing coffee with desserts."

Set up your own sampling

The best way to learn what types of coffee pair well with different desserts is to taste and try several combinations. Pay attention to your senses – the aroma of the drink, the texture of the dessert and the flavors that each brings out in the other. Familiarize yourself with the different characteristics of different beans, and feel free to ask your local barista for guidance.

Here are some pairings to try:

Hartford Coffee's Mexico Pluma coffee and a snickerdoodle cookie: This very light-roast coffee has a pleasant, smooth finish and goes well with the crisp texture and cinnamon-sugar sweetness of the cookie.

Kaldi's Ethiopia Yirgacheffe coffee and classic cheesecake: A bright taste component emerges with this combination. The acidity of the light roast coffee cuts through the creamy texture of the cheesecake, and the berry undertones in the drink complement the dessert much like a berry topping would.

Northwest Coffee's Guatemala Full City roast coffee with carrot cake: This medium-bodied coffee is slightly sweet, but has a clean, mellow taste that doesn't compete with the spices in the cake.

Kaldi's Espresso and very dark chocolate: Even in small amounts, the combination of the bittersweet taste of the chocolate and the strong, slightly bitter taste of the espresso is very intense and satisfying.