

The coffee house

One of the most successful global brands today is Starbucks, the American-based chain of coffee shops that is now present in more than 55 countries worldwide. You could be forgiven for thinking that it is quintessentially modern: a symbol not only of the increasing trend towards globalisation, but also of the growing importance of service industries and leisure in contemporary society. Indeed, Starbucks and its various competitors have transformed the high streets of many towns around the world. The now commonplace sight of seeing people working wirelessly on the latest laptop or texting on their 3G phone as they sip a coffee would have been unthinkable just 20 years ago. As it happens though, the Starbucks phenomenon is simply an updated version of an ancient institution -the coffee house.

We do not know for certain exactly when mankind's addiction to coffee began but it is generally supposed that coffee was first roasted and brewed in Sufi monasteries in Yemen approximately 600 years ago. From there it moved across Arabia into India and Europe where it was then exported to Indonesia and the Americas. It was in the Arab world though that the concept of the coffee house was born and flourished. The very first shops were opened in Constantinople – modern-day Istanbul – and the idea spread to the great cities of Mecca, Damascus and Cairo. From the beginning coffee houses became centres of the community: places where people could meet and talk, exchanging views on the great events of the day. Sometimes, this could create problems with the authorities because in some instances the new coffee houses became the centres for political gatherings and it was not uncommon in times of unrest for them to be closed down. Typically though, the activities in these first coffee houses were peaceful; they became places not just for drinking coffee, but for exchanging gossip, for listening to story-tellers or for playing chess and backgammon. This is a tradition that continues to this day.

In time, the concept spread to Europe. By the mid 18th century coffee houses had become familiar sights in all the great European capitals and these were in many ways similar to their Arabic counterparts. Here too they served as meeting houses for all levels of society, places that were open to anyone - provided they were male. In the highly structured societies of the time, this could create problems as they became identified with the then subversive ideas of republicanism and equality. Indeed in 1685 King Charles the Second tried to close down all 3,000 coffee houses in England on the

grounds that were a breeding ground for discontent against himself and the ministers in his government. This attempt failed after just two days, as the coffee house had become too deeply embedded in English culture.

As coffee became less of a luxury item and more available to all levels of society each country in Europe naturally developed its own coffee house culture. The French coffee houses made a significant contribution to cultural advancement as the first encyclopedia is said to have been inspired by meetings of French intellectuals at the Cafe Procope in Paris. The coffee houses in Budapest and Vienna were from the beginning highly fashionable places to see and be seen and to taste the finest coffee. And perhaps it is no coincidence that it was there that Franz Georg Kolschitzky introduced the idea of filtering coffee, as well as the softening the brew with milk and sugar. Another Viennese innovation was to serve sweet pastries and other confectionary treats to go with the coffee. The great age of the European coffee house was in 18th century London though. They were famed as “penny universities” where you could buy a cup of coffee for the price of a penny and sit and listen to the great and the good discuss the issues of the day. These London coffee houses increasingly became centres of business and they were the forerunners of the London Stock Exchange and Lloyds insurance market, two institutions that now dominate the British economy.

The heyday of the coffee house was relatively short and by the time of the 19th century the institution had gone into a decline in many countries. There are a variety of explanations for this including the rival claims of public houses selling alcohol, a changed political climate and the quality of the product. What is more certain is that the invention of the espresso machine in the early 20th century was responsible for the change in fortunes of the coffee house. In Italy, Luigi Bezzera filed a patent for a machine that pushed steam and water through a "group" that held the coffee grounds in a filter. Later this patent was purchased by Desiderio Pavoni, and in 1905 the Pavoni company began manufacturing machines based on the Bezzera patent. Although this method increased the speed dramatically, from a brewing time of 4 minutes to about 20 seconds, hence the name espresso, the coffee tasted bitter because the steam was too hot. Through more fine-tuning of the idea, from Cremonesi to Achille Gaggia in 1946, we have the piston lever espresso machine. The Gaggia Coffee Bar in Italy was the first location to use these machines and to offer espresso along with the regular coffee. The modern age of coffee houses was born and the Italian espresso bar was taken by immigrants to New York where it was rediscovered by the founders of Starbucks.

fashionable	often	founded
tradition	different	revival
later	occasionally	discussed
ancient	recent	improved
similar	radical	patent

Coffee houses are not a (1) _____ invention but have a long history. The first houses were (2) _____ in the Arab world and were primarily places where people could discuss what was happening in the world. (3) _____, they became the focus for political unrest. The early European coffee houses were not very (4) _____ and were sometimes threatened with closure because of (5) _____ ideas discussed there. While each country developed its own (6) _____, the most famous coffee houses were in London. The invention of the espresso machine eventually _____ the speed and quality of coffee making and led to the the _____ of the coffee house.