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Spilling the Beans

Mohamad Kadry
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If there were ever an international addiction so broad that it spanned every nation and translated into every culture, it would be coffee.

Arabs, too, have an especially rich affinity for the drink, with Bedouin traditions forming strict rules and etiquette for serving and preparing it for guests. To celebrate the 10th anniversary of Costa Coffee in the UAE, we sat down with expert and general manager, Eric Hughes, to get his take on the world's favourite drink.

Why did Costa Coffee decide to initially expand in the UAE ten years ago?

I think it was because of the coffee culture here, as well as the fantastic partnership with The Emirates Group. They're really passionate about the brand.



With so many new coffee houses sprouting up across the country, how are you dealing with the barrage of competition and what are your plans for the future?

Coffee shops began from a handful across the UAE to somewhere in the region of 260 coffee brands that now exist here. We've still got a huge share of that market with 70 stores - most of them based in Dubai. We've had staggering growth in the past five years and even with the global economic downturn we've opened another ten stores over the past 12 months. We're not very well represented in some of the other emirates, but I feel as though we need to expand, particularly in Abu Dhabi. We think we've got a great coffee, and a great ambience in the store but people do appreciate convenience and they want it at their doorstep, so we intend to be close by everybody.

Around the world, coffee drinking has actually increased despite the global recession. Why do you think that is?

Coffee is the most popular drink in the world and I think it's because it's an affordable treat. Even if times are tough and people are feeling the pinch you can still go and get yourself a fantastic cup of coffee. Maybe it's one of those little luxuries that doesn't get so hard-hit by a recession.

You recently insured your Coffee Master's tongue for Dhs60 million. What is the story behind this?

Obviously it's a great story. They really did insure his tongue because he does taste all the batches of coffee from the factory. People like him are called master roasters and they are sort of like master wine tasters. He ultimately tastes all the blends with his famous tongue.

Coffee drinking is a major part of Arabic culture. How has Costa translated this into its local business model?

Our shops have a huge following among the Emirati and Arab population. We are loved by locals, and when they patronise a café, they dwell a long time having two or three cups of coffee. Sometimes they'll go through the whole menu in a course of a few weeks because they like to experiment with the different drinks.

How much coffee do you personally drink?

Too much (laughs). Funny enough, I'm starting to move away from drinking cappuccinos and lattes because I'm almost like a baby drinking so much milk everyday. So I'm moving more towards an espresso. I'll probably have five cups of coffee throughout the day, but I don't fully finish the last few cups.

Coffee culture

Serving coffee to visitors is an age-old custom derived from Bedouin hospitality traditions. The ritual of coffee serving is called *gawha* and is bound by rules of etiquette. In the presence of guests, the host will roast, cool and grind the beans. Using a mortar and pestle, he will add cardamom pods in equal measure to the coffee beans during the grinding process. When the coffee is brewed, the host pours for his guests (the higher the kettle is lifted, the more adoration the host has for you). Unsweetened fresh dates, a staple in the Khaleeji diet, are served with the coffee.

Variously known as Qahwah Saadah (Bedouin coffee), this brew is flavoured with cardamom - sometimes called Grains of Paradise - and optionally with sugar.

There are as many varied recipes as there are tribes to serve them. Creativity and experimentation will customise the brew to suit your tastes.

kadry@khaleejtimes.com