

Got milk?

You know where your coffee comes from, but what about the milk in it? **Anna Sulan Masing** reports on a growing movement towards quality, sustainable dairy



At the start of this year, as Greggs launched its meat-free sausage roll and hundreds of thousands of people in the UK took part in Veganuary, the *Economist* proclaimed 2019 as the “Year of the Vegan”. There’s no doubt we’re seeing a rise in people turning to plant-based diets. So what does that mean for speciality coffee?

The reasons for a rise in plant-based food and drink consumption are varied – consumers are not a homogeneous group. The main drivers of the shift are concerns about animal welfare, personal health and global sustainability, none of which are exclusive to a plant-based lifestyle but are the primary perceptions of what is gained by one.

Within the speciality coffee industry, the focus is on what usually accompanies the coffee – the milk. Concerns over coffee farming practices and traceability are key, so it makes sense that those translate to milk. But the conversation has largely been limited to “dairy or non-dairy”, lacking nuance and failing to address why and how.

In the past year the consumption of mylks (alternative milks) has seen a significant increase among coffee drinkers, in particular oat mylk. Chris Whitelaw, hot beverages manager at Tate Galleries, has seen an increase of 31,000 oat drinks sold between 2017-18 and 2018-2019. Peter Dore-Smith, founder of groundbreaking Fitzrovia coffee shop Kaffeine, says 19% of his coffee sales are with mylk, with 38% of that being oat mylk.

But while these numbers may have increased, they also show that alternatives to dairy are still a small percentage of overall milk consumption (at the Tate that’s still only 0.2% of coffees). This means dairy milk is an important issue. Both Chris and Peter emphasise that their primary concern with milk is ensuring great flavour and how it holds a pattern when used in latte art, but they acknowledge that using the best milk is also about working with producers and suppliers who focus on the environment their cows live in.

Dear dairy

This is partly what provoked a new speciality milk-for-coffee movement. It’s in its infancy in the UK, but there has been a boom in the past couple of years. Rupert Cyster, managing director of Northiam Dairy in East Sussex, says that “if competition can drive up the quality of milk – as a whole, across the industry – that is a good thing”. He adds that the idea of quality incorporates sustaining a livelihood for dairy farmers as well as the taste of the milk.

Among those creating milk for baristas, it’s generally agreed that milk from Jersey cows – which has a higher protein and butterfat content than

“We perceive milk as a product that has potential to be unique and specialised”



Holstein-Friesians (the black and white ones) – is preferable. However, when Brades Farm in Lancashire was named Dairy Innovator of the Year at the British Farming Awards in 2017, farmers Joe and Ed Towers explained that they had “found our sweet spot at 4.5% butterfat” through combining the milk of both breeds. Joe tells *Caffeine* that they “wanted to differentiate milk, perceive it less like a commodity and more like a product that has potential to be unique and specialised, in the way that coffee is in the speciality coffee world”.

Looking at milk this way, Joe says, provides space to address questions around ethical practices and “for this to be the case, full traceability is necessary”. Partnering with the speciality coffee world made sense for the Towers brothers – the industry’s passion and concern about sustainable futures matched theirs, and this in turn supports business growth in a collaborative fashion.

One of the main critiques of the global dairy industry is the emission of methane gases. A 2018 study from the University of Oxford showed dairy milk could produce almost three times that of non-dairy milk. For the Brades Farm team, ethical practices are about the wider industry, not just the cows on the their farms. They have been conducting an 18-month trial with a Swiss biotech company, Zaluvida, feeding their herd an all-natural supplement called Mootral. Key to this process was ensuring there was no effect on the taste and quality of the milk – and they have seen a reduction in emissions of 30%.

Special source

What about the barista’s perspective? Celeste Wong, freelance barista and café consultant, says that “among the baristas and in the cafés I know, there is a huge interest in the products they use with coffees. We make an effort to know so much about the coffees we use – origins, processes and so on – why wouldn’t we want to know about the milk we use and how it’s produced?”

Chris at Tate echoes this. “There are three elements to a coffee – milk, coffee and water. So it is key to know about each.” The staff at Tate do blind tasting of their milk suppliers, as well as checking out the companies to see what their beliefs and practices are.

But Celeste also points out the complications inherent in industry



The Towers family at Brades Farm, who focus on quality and sustainability to produce superior milk

shifts. "Small family-owned farms who have been in the dairy business for generations can't just change practices immediately – it's costly." So how is this sector growing? What do the changes look like?

Barista and entrepreneur Shaun Young is the founder of the Estate Dairy, described as "a collective of young passionate individuals dedicated to producing and bottling the highest-quality milk and cream". Young realised that the speciality coffee scene had matured greatly but there hadn't been much discussion beyond the bean, leaving a gap in the market. The Estate Dairy sources milk from various farms in Somerset, and anyone who wants to know about the locations, breeds and farm environments can find that information on its website.

The language of speciality milk is similar to that of wineries, high-end food producers and indeed coffee – terroir is discussed, as well as the seasonal environment. And on that basis, Northiam's Rupert believes the UK should be seen as the milk supplier to the coffee world. "England grows grass well – it has a long history for quality grass," he says. Cows that eat well produce exceptional milk, which in turn will make exceptional coffee.

The only way is ethics
Some coffee drinkers might find it hard enough to understand the details



about speciality coffee – where is it from, how is farmed, processed and roasted – without worrying about milk too. But many of those who work with speciality coffee are concerned about the traceability, the ethics and above all the quality of product, including the milk. This creates a sense of trust with consumers, who have faith that their favourite independent coffee shop continues that practice of care through to all aspects of the business.

This is a tough responsibility for cafés, especially as hospitality businesses work on tight margins, but

it is one that should be taken seriously. As consumer trends continue to move towards environmental concerns – see the Attenborough effect on single-use plastics – people will increasingly want to know the ins and outs of supply chains across the coffee industry.

New and improved
So what's next for innovation in milk? As we've seen, this is really a question about farming; and changes in that industry, while possible, are slow and difficult. So what are the other milk options for coffee? This year at the World Barista Championships, winner Jooyeon Jeon used freeze-distilled milk. This technique, newly popular on the competition circuit, involves freezing the milk and slowly letting it melt. The sugar, fats and proteins melt first, and these are then mixed with standard milk to create a richer product.

Bartek Jankowski, lead barista at Kaffeine, has been inspired by the Roman espresso con panna and is currently finding ways to serve cream with or alongside coffee. "I think it is a perfect treat after hard day of work or a moment of pleasure when with your best friends in the afternoon – when you have time to sit and slowly enjoy the moment." This is a welcome reminder that innovation is also about finding joy, and that serving the best product is about the pleasure customers draw from the experience.

The stories behind your daily brew

Subscribe to the trusted guide to speciality coffee

Free delivery directly to your door
Never miss an issue
Get your copy first



Subscribe from £25 per year
(Caffeine is bi-monthly - 6 issues a year)

caffinemag.com/shop

 MILK FOAM
AT THE PUSH OF A BUTTON

UBERMILK: UBER GOOD
ULTIMATE CONVENIENCE
EXQUISITELY EASY



-  At the push of a button
-  One touch display
-  Perfect milk foam everytime

HANDMADE
IN GERMANY



@CoffeeOmega ubermilk@coffeeomega.co.uk

@coffeeomega www.coffeeomega.co.uk

London Coffee Festival · Stand M16 · 28-31 March 2019
www.londoncoffeefestival.com