



# Making a difference

## Tom Stevenson



Every time I book into a hotel that boasts a Nespresso machine in each room, I let out a sigh. It should be seen as a nice touch—but while the coffee looks the part, with a consistently dense *crema*, I find the taste so insipid.

Simon Stockton, the reserve judge at the Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships (CSWWC), convinced me, however, that Nespresso, the machine, is brilliant; only Nespresso, the pod, is not. Being Australian, Simon is serious about his coffee. When the CSWWC judged in Tunbridge Wells, he always made the judges take a pit stop at The Black Dog while moving between the tasting venue and our hotel. The Black Dog serves the best coffee in town (Monmouth coffee), and it is not for nothing that it is known as a “little bit of Australia in Tunbridge Wells”!

Taking Simon at his word, I did a little digging and discovered that Nespresso was invented by a Swiss guy called Eric Favre as long ago as 1976. This was itself rather puzzling, because Nespresso has really only been a “thing” since 2006, when George Clooney became involved.

Favre had started working for Nestlé in 1975, at the height of the instant-coffee market, when Nescafé instant coffee—which Neil Armstrong took to the moon and back—was one of Nestlé's most lucrative brands. It's no surprise, then, that when Favre invented Nespresso at the company's packaging division just one year later, there was little incentive for Nestlé to commercialize it just yet.

### Espresso epiphany

The how and why of the machine's invention is a story in itself. Favre had just married an Italian lady, Anna-Maria, who laughed when he told her he was going to invent a machine that would make good espresso at the press of a button. “How can you, when you don't even know what a good espresso tastes like?” she asked—and to remedy that, they both set off on a tour of Italy to discover why some espressos are better than others.

It was in Rome that they found the legendary Caffè Sant'Eustachio in Piazza di Sant'Eustachio. What caught their attention was the long line this small establishment was drawing, while other cafés in the square were virtually empty. The espresso machines in those days were primarily direct lever-operated, which entails pulling up the handle to bring the hot water in, leaving it a few seconds to pre-infuse, then pulling it down again to push the water through the coffee.

How that lever is pulled down affects the aromatics and the *crema*. Favre observed that while other baristas pulled the lever at different speeds, they all pulled it just once, whereas Eugenio, the barista at Caffè Sant'Eustachio, pulled it down in several short pumps. His objective was to achieve maximum aeration and create the softest, densest, and creamiest of *creme*, something that Caffè Sant'Eustachio has become famous for, though more for tourists than purists these days.

Favre managed to replicate the effect of Eugenio's usage of a nine-bar full-sized espresso machine with an automated 19-bar small-sized device, but it took ten years to convince Nestlé to commercialize the product, launching it in Japan in 1986, when he was made CEO of the newly formed Nespresso business.

Favre left Nespresso in 1990 after a dispute with Jean-Paul Gaillard, who was brought in to make the company profitable. When Favre left, Gaillard took over as CEO and continued with his reversal of the Nespresso strategy. Instead of selling clunky machines that were so expensive only businesses could afford them, Gaillard made the machines sleek and practically gave them away, focusing on the pods for the primary source of income and profit.

This was the beginning of Nespresso's ascendancy, but it was not until 2006 that George Clooney became the face of Nespresso, making it a super-cool, luxury brand that the aspiring classes just had to own.

### Arabica difference

Very few Nespresso pods are 100 percent arabica, and I have yet to taste one that excites me. Most Nespresso pods contain robusta, particularly the darker roasts, and if you are partial to robusta or always drink your coffee with milk, then Nespresso might well be for you—but I do not like robusta, and I drink Nespresso-sized *ristretti*, with no milk or sugar, so every aspect of robusta is intensified.

Nespresso-sized shots are different from those served by a barista from a traditional machine. I normally drink a classic espresso (about 30ml) and only occasionally a true *ristretto* (about 15ml), but a Nespresso espresso is 40ml and a Nespresso *ristretto* 40ml. You can manually adjust the size of any coffee on a Nespresso machine, but not below the smallest shot of 25ml, so the Nespresso-sized *ristretto* I drink is effectively a short espresso.

After plowing my way through one highly praised Nespresso-compatible range after another, I found Difference Coffee to be in a completely different class. There is one Difference Coffee pod I am not particularly fond of, but its Hawaii Kona is out of this world, and I would happily drink the entry-level Yellow Bourbon and Swiss Water Decaf until the cows come home. Difference Coffees are not just 100 percent arabica; they are from the top one percent of quality-graded arabica. Furthermore, they are varietal, single-estate, and often single-lot. Difference Coffees are found in many of the world's greatest Michelin-starred restaurants, and I now understand why.

At CSWWC 2023 the team drank its way through more than 1,000 Yellow Bourbon and Swiss Water Decaf coffees. When we ran out, I ordered 100 pods from one of the greatest names in coffee worldwide for next-day delivery, but after the first cup hardly anyone touched them!

Now, whenever I have a hotel room that boasts a Nespresso machine, I always make sure to take some Difference Coffee with me. ■