



in the news

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Perking up coffee

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Two decades after Starbucks made sludgy cowboy coffee as rare as white buffalo, the next big thing in caffeine has debuted in Madison.

Coffee made by a Clover brewing machine, with a computer for a brain and an \$11,000 price tag, is now being quaffed and analyzed by even the most jaded coffee geeks at Ancora Coffee on King Street. Introduced in 2004 in Seattle by a product designer with a Stanford degree, it gets lavish attention on blogs — even though actual encounters with Clover machines are still uncommon. Madison's first Clover is No. 209 in the nation.

Compared to watching Mr. Coffee drip, this is Cirque de Soleil. Ancora's training director, Ryan Baughn, brewing a cup of his favorite Sumatran coffee, obeyed the Clover's commands displayed on a screen. It told him how many grams of beans to use, how finely to grind them, how much water to use at what temperature, and how long the grounds must be in contact with the water (or "dwell time" in coffee jargon).

Baughn put the coffee grounds in a silver cylinder on the top of the Clover and stirred gently. The grounds abruptly disappeared as if swallowed by quicksand into the bowels of the machine.

After 40 to 70 seconds of soft gurgling, the grounds levitated out of the machine, foamy and dry. Coffee dark as molasses swirled into the cup below.

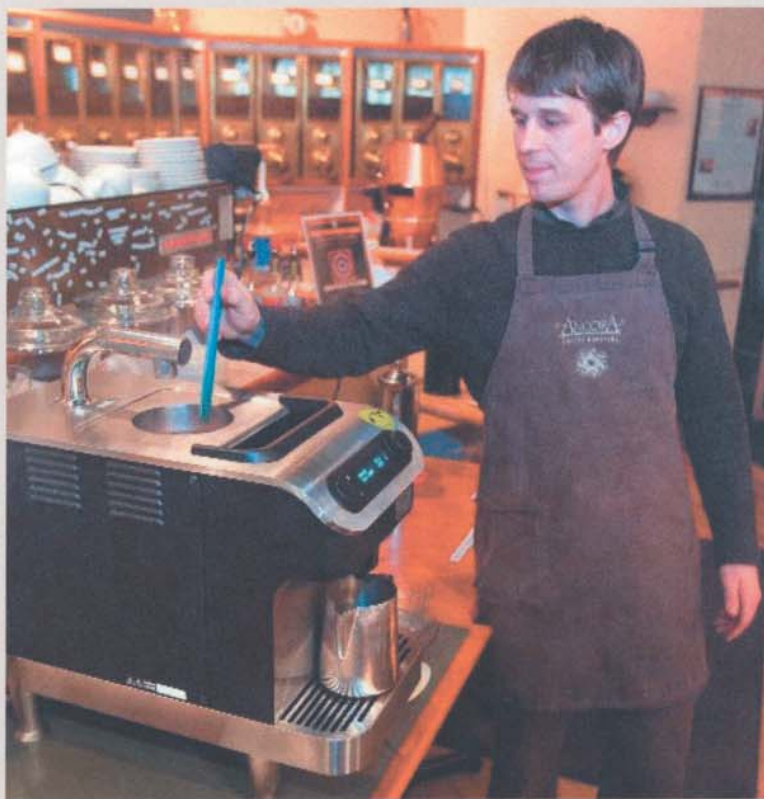
When it was over, Baughn swept a silver-handled squeegee across the top of Clover to remove the used grounds, which by now looked like a neat little toupee. Then the machine was carefully rinsed so residual coffee oils wouldn't taint the next cup.

Next, he brewed a cup of Rwandan coffee. The Clover gave him different specs for it as well. Precise parameters for making each coffee variety move back and forth between a mini computer in the machine and a Web database via Ethernet connection. "Rwandan coffee is much lighter than the Sumatran, so its dwell time is shorter, which brings out lush floral, fruity tones," Baughn said. "The Clover is able to bring out the best characteristics in every coffee. It's difficult to balance brightness and sweetness with body and depth of flavor. Other brewing forms don't allow you to control all the variables."

Each cup is individually brewed, based on precise specifications set by individual roasters with guidance from the Clover company. Customers can set parameters for their own cup if they want.

"This is the first innovation in coffee since 1945, when the piston-driven espresso machine was invented," said Baughn, who describes it as a cross between a French press (a simple form of plunge brewing invented circa 1850 in Provence) and a vacuum brewer (invented in Berlin circa 1830, which applies the science of vapor pressure and vacuum force). The Clover is better than either of those forms, according to Baughn, because it eliminates the problems of sediment and overbrewing common with the French press, and overheated water which causes flatness in vacuum-brewed coffee.

Baughn figures that if Ancora sells 25 to 30 cups of Clover brews daily for \$2.50 each, the machine will pay for itself in about a year. "People still don't know much about it yet, but we're getting really good feedback." Recently he led a tasting so people could compare French press, vacuum and Clover brews. "For anyone who cares a lot about where a coffee comes from, how its grown and roasted, this machine is the logical next step."



Ryan Baughn demonstrates how coffee grounds are gently stirred before they plunge into the Clover brewing machine.