



# Decoding the Flat White

The flat white has remained a standard Australian coffee for years. But just how relevant is it on today's coffee menu? *BeanScene* explores whether changing menu descriptions could lead to the drink's demise.

**W**hen mobile coffee van owner Chris Brady attended a suburban football match in Victoria's outer suburbs, an older gentleman asked him for 'a coffee'. Chris ran the customer through a long list of coffee preferences, styles and prices: latte, cappuccino, flat white, espresso, ristretto, short black, long black.

"He then said to me, 'son, I remember when the only decision you had to make was whether to have coffee with or without milk. But, I'll have a flat white thanks,'" says Chris of Rush Mobile Café.

Chris says this man's coffee preference is a common order. "People still find flat whites a simple, assuming, easy to go drink," he says. "Working in a mobile unit, it's been interesting to see predominant coffee preferences in different areas and demographics of Victoria. Even with the growth of our industry I find flat whites or white coffees are still a popular order in traditional working class areas, and

from customers of the older generation. Customers will say 'I'll have my coffee just like I have it at home please – flat white of course.' But when I work in the city, the orders are mostly lattes."

The origin of the flat white is widely discussed and remains largely inconclusive. Jeff Kennedy from Acme & Co in Wellington, New Zealand says he was working at Caffè L'affaire 25 years ago when the drink was first introduced to the shop.

"Back then there were a number of pioneers starting the coffee industry in New Zealand, like John Burton and Michael Allpress. Up until then big coffee chain companies were the only main players, and the cappuccino was popular everywhere you went," says Jeff. "Our business thrived on serving it. But, we had a tough job convincing people that the temperature of a coffee should be a particular way, and that coffee should be presented in a certain way. There was lots of animosity from customers if the coffee wasn't scalding, and full of sugar."

Jeff says he persevered in making cappuccinos, until one day he got fed up. "Making cappuccinos each day became a hassle and we were annoyed at the number of customers measuring the level of foam on each cup of coffee. So we decided to make our own version of a drink that we called a flat white: a double shot in a Duralex glass with a balance of creamy milk with no foam," he says. "It was easy for us to make and the drink became very popular."

From 1990 onwards Jeff served his version of the flat white and converted his cappuccino customers into flat white drinkers.

"Australians may claim to have invented the flat white, but I can say New Zealand invented the flat white for sure, just like the pavlova," he laughs. "But it's important to remember that the history of [New Zealand's] coffee culture is rather new and completely different to Australia. Our coffee preferences didn't come from an immigrant point of view, ours have developed out of craft, passion and

Bluestone Lane in the United States says Americans love the slightly stronger taste of a flat white more than a typical latte.



dedication.”

On a daily take of the coffee offerings at Prefab, the flagship café for Jeff’s company Acme & Co, he says 80 per cent of coffee orders are flat white, 5 per cent are cappuccinos and the remainder a split between short black and lattes. “Those figures are not just a representation of our customer preferences, it’s the same all over New Zealand, flat whites are dominant,” he says.

Espressology’s Instaurator says the flat white is an inbred part of Australia’s ANZAC history. “In the mid-1990s people who drank flat whites were considered instant coffee drinkers. They would boil their water to 100°C, add a bit to the cup with their instant coffee granules, and finish with a touch of milk. That was a flat white. That’s how people drank their coffee after the war until they were introduced to espresso. Even then, people would still say, ‘I want my coffee white and flat, with not one bit of foam.’ It’s only as we’ve become introduced to other coffee varieties through social education that our preferences have changed. But the flat white remains a part of our coffee culture.”

Regardless of who invented the flat white, it’s thanks to the spread of Australians and New Zealanders travelling around the world that the drink is now part of café menus in London and the United States.

One such café is Bluestone Lane in the US, which operates three stores in Manhattan, New York. Visitors to the Manhattan shops will find all the espresso-

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based favourites including piccolo latte, long black and cold brew. But Owner Nicholas Stone who is originally from Melbourne, says the flat white had to be on the menu from the start.

“[It’s] a key part of the menu as it’s such an authentic coffee beverage for those from Australia and New Zealand,” he says. “The Americans absolutely love it. It’s in the top three most popular coffee drinks ordered, which includes both drip coffee and espresso coffee beverages. The Americans love that it has a slightly stronger taste than a typical latte. It has enough bold flavour and sweetness to keep people hooked.”

Bluestone Lane presents their flat white in a six-ounce ceramic cup. “[It’s] the only way you should,” Nicholas says. “[The



flat white is essentially] a strong latte with less foam – you’ve got to make it easy over here in the US, where the majority of espresso based drinkers are familiar with the Starbucks menu.”

Even with the rise of third-wave brewing methods emerging in US coffee shops, Nicolas says the flat white will remain a permanent item on his menu. “People have always had milk with tea and coffee and I don’t see [that] the pour-over popularity means that the demand for flat whites is going to come to an end any time soon,” he says.

When *Beanscene* posed the question of relevance of the flat white to the modern coffee shop menu on its Facebook page, people responded in an overwhelming way. Many café owners said it was their most popular coffee order, and a great way to practise latte art. Many comments debated the way a flat white should be

presented; the level of foam and cup size, while others simply wouldn't hear of the iconic drink being replaced. "It definitely has its place," said one post. "Australia isn't ready for [the flat white] to be taken off the menu yet," said another.

Coffex Coffee Roasters Managing Director Fong Loong agrees with the majority. "The flat white is a domestic drink that's long been an iconic Australian favourite," he says. "People order drinks according to what they're used to and what they like. Even though the younger

and flat whites in six ounce and 12-ounce cups. We've found that the standard eight-ounce cup measures more to a 10-ounce cup which contains roughly 300 millilitres in a cup. But if the cup measured about 180 millilitres we find the milk to coffee ratio gives a much better, sweeter coffee experience. We're battling hard to get the cup sizes true to what we believe produces the best outcome, so a person who orders a take away or sits down for the coffee will get the same experience," says Paul.

To counteract wrong milk to coffee

"We only serve what we're 100 per cent happy with, and if that means losing the latte and serving a flat white with the right milk to coffee ratio, then we will."

Paul says continual experimentation can only lead to a better overall result. "We need to be challenging the best ways of serving coffee. Just the other day we discovered that serving an espresso in a slightly bigger cup than normal gave it a completely different taste profile. The smallest variance can completely change the flavour profile of a coffee," says Paul.

To avoid any menu confusion between the varied milk drinks, Pablo and Rusty's in New South Wales has gone one step further. "We describe our coffees as black coffee and white coffee, but still provide particular drinks as they are requested. We steam all milk coffees the same, so there's no variation to the foam produced. We produce all our milk coffees with about .5 to 1 centimetre foam. We only differentiate by strength if people ask, otherwise a white coffee is served in a six-ounce cup, dine in or take away," says Pablo and Rusty's Managing Director Saxon Wright.

Saxon says often a customer's preconceived notion of how a drink should be presented can hamper their coffee experience.

"We want to break down the idea of what's an Italian drink, or American

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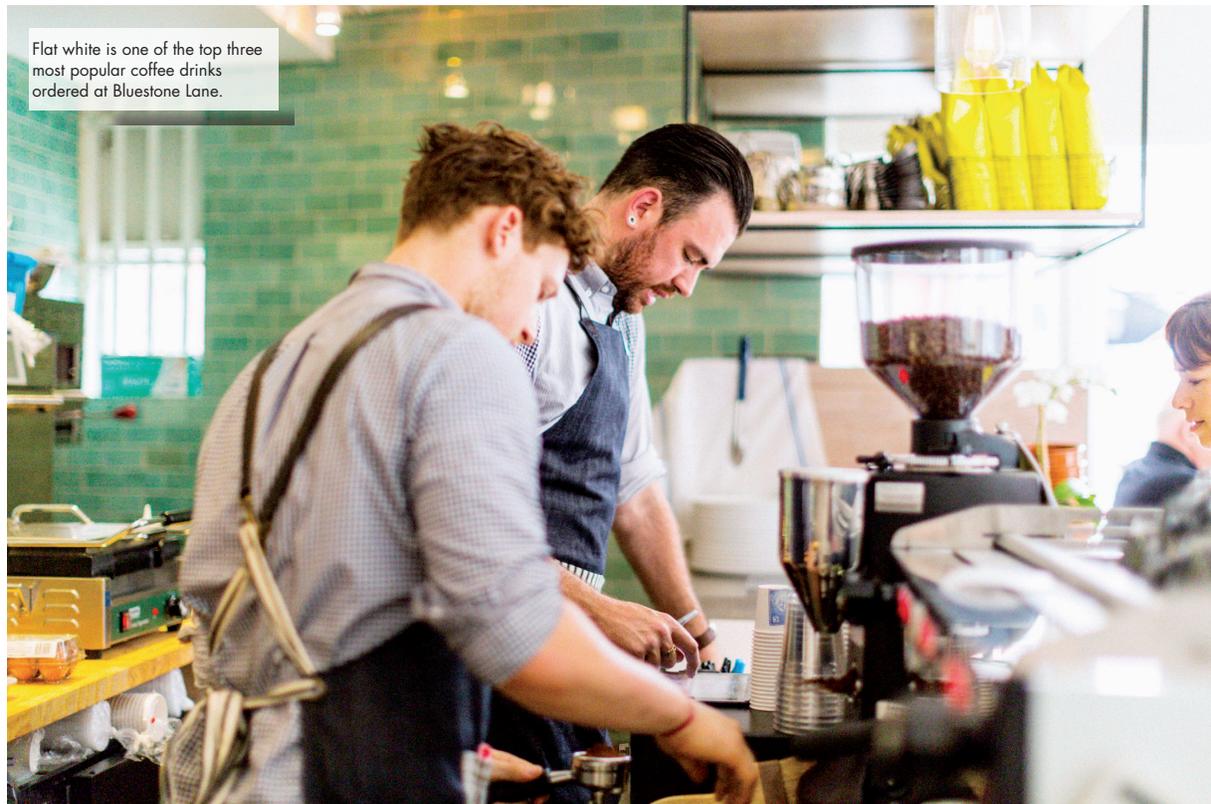
generation is experimenting more with alternate brewing methods, which I find very refreshing, traditional coffees such as the flat white are still largely dominant," he says.

For Ona Coffee's Business Development Manager Paul Asquith, getting the flat white right is all about the size of the cup in which it's served, and balancing the coffee to milk ratio.

"At our Canberra café called The Cupping Room, we serve cappuccinos

and ratios, The Cupping Room has decided to focus on serving cappuccinos and flat whites for their milk-based offerings, removing lattes altogether.

"The main reason is because of the inconsistent milk to coffee ratio. We're not happy about the glass size in which a latte is served. We pour 20 grams of espresso, and add 160 to 180 grams of milk but the result is a huge milky drink. We find that we're losing the quality of espresso that we work so hard to achieve," says Paul.





Ona Coffee's Canberra shop has removed lattes from its menu, instead only serving cappuccinos and flat whites for its milk-based coffees.

coffee. We don't need to be dependent on other cultures of drinks, and just create our own coffee culture with uncomplicated options," says Saxon. "We're trying to educate our customers that a coffee is defined by the ratio of coffee to milk, and not by the level of foam that sits on top."

To Saxon, the flat white was a reaction to "frothy cappuccinos" of which he says is no longer relevant. "Ten to 15 years ago (and some places still), the milk in a flat white had a watery texture because it wasn't stretched well and produced no foam. Cappuccinos had too much aerated froth, not silky micro-foam. So, we decided to focus on the quality and style of the milk, which naturally creates smooth foam up to about 1centimetre, rather than defining our drinks by the type of foam," Saxon says.

To further investigate the importance of milk texturing, Pablo and Rusty's host courses on the chemistry of milk. "We learn how the milk proteins react and bind with milk, and how it affects the overall flavour. It's certainly our reasoning as to why we stretch milk the same for all our milk coffees," says Saxon.

Two-time Australian Barista Champion Scottie Callaghan says regardless of whether a flat white is defined by the glass or ceramic cup it's served in, or the level of foam on top, the flat white means something different to each barista and each customer, and it should be served how the paying customer prefers.

"Every successful café I've ever seen is so because its customers have a sense of ownership of the place; whether it's in their regular order, knowing a certain barista, or the particular seat they like to go to. Not serving a flat white would be like taking away a sense of customer ownership," he says. "But customers need to respect that it's a café's own discretion as to how they serve what's on their menu. Flat whites or latte will be interpreted differently whether it's in Australia, London, the US or New Zealand."

Scottie says coffee menus are all about semantics. "Take a look at Starbucks, a large coffee chain that uses terminology on a menu to create culture. Starbucks' CEO Howard Schultz came up with the specific menu titles because he realised people wanted to put their own identity in the coffee they order," says Scottie. "It's all about marketing perception. Customers like going into their local Starbucks and saying 'I'll have a tall skinny latte.' But after awhile they don't really need the menu to know what to order. It's the same when people walk into McDonalds."

According to Scottie, that sense of familiarity is the same for the flat white. "People know that they can walk into a café and the flat white will be there," he says. "Australia's are not ready to replace it yet. It's not going anywhere."



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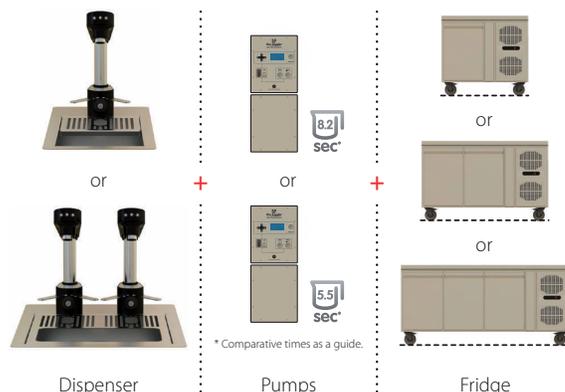
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