

C O F F E E

Make It Right

BY MARK PENDERGRAST

It is astonishing how many ways humans have come up with to prepare coffee. Despite the fact that the infusion process itself is fairly rudimentary, some brewers—from a complex and rather dangerous-sounding electric apparatus invented by Manlio Marzetti in 1909 to many present-day devices—look like products from a mad scientist's lab.

Is there a meaningful difference among machines? Does the convenience of one trump the precise control offered by the trendy pour-over method? Do the material and shape of cone and filter matter? I decided to find out, and found four brewers to recommend, each presenting a slightly different flavor profile.

Three devices cost \$50 or less. For each brew, I used Sunrise Blend from Cape Cod Coffee Roasters (www.capecodroasters.com, \$12.35 for 1 pound), a pleasant mix of Colombian, Guatemalan and Brazilian beans. I ground them to a medium grind just before use. For each brew, I used four tablespoons coffee with 12 fluid ounces of 210° F water, presoaking to allow the grounds to bloom. Brew time was three or four minutes, depending on the drip time.

The Sowden SoftBrew (www.amazon.com, \$50 for 4-cup model), created by designer George Sowden of Milan, Italy, looks and feels elegant and comes in a variety of porcelain designs, all of which would look good on your dining table. The stainless-steel basket features extremely fine holes on the side and bottom. Simply put the grounds in the basket, presoak, then pour hot water over them and stir briefly. Put on the top, allow to steep and dispense in four minutes. My cup was smooth and indeed soft on the palate, with a hint of lemon and raisin.

The Kalita Wave Dripper is a terrific find for pour-over fans and has become something of a cult product for coffee aficionados. Made in Japan, it comes in stainless steel, glass or porcelain. I bought the 185 stainless steel model from Prima Coffee Equipment (www.prima-coffee.com, \$30), but it came without filters, which, it turned out, every supplier in the United States was out of. I was able to snag a few from Cursive Coffee in Burlington, Vt., but they are often available online as well.

The Kalita has a flat bottom, which is divided into three sections by thin metal strips that raise the paper filter a little to prevent clogging. A small hole at the end of each strip promotes an even tripartite drip. The paper filters have fluted sides (hence the “wave” name) that presumably promote even flow. The result? A slightly sweeter cup than the Sowden, with a bit more body, and the lemon-citrus notes had a touch of tangerine, the raisin a touch of chocolate.

Next was the Impress, a handsome press-pot device that can double as a travel mug. Made by Gamila, of Raleigh, N.C., the Impress brewer (www.designbox.us, \$40) comes with parts that can be washed separately—a sturdy, well-insulated container, an inner plunger with a rubber ring, a bottom stainless-steel filter and a rubber lid.

The directions say that the bottom filter can be used as a measuring cup for four tablespoons, but it doesn't actually hold that much, so I



Clockwise from top left: Gamila Impress (press-pot method); Kalita Wave Dripper (pour-over method); Behmor Brazen (automatic drip brewer); Sowden SoftBrew (press-pot method).



used my own scoop. To brew, put the grounds into the outer cup, wet them, then pour in the rest of the hot water. Stir and place the inner ring on top for a few minutes. Then press gently down, trapping the grounds in the bottom filter. The Impress keeps the coffee quite hot, so I preferred to pour it into a mug. This brew featured a heavier body, with a hint of melon along with orange and raisin notes.

Finally, I splurged for the Brazen (www.seattlecoffee.com, \$200), a handsome black-and-silver automatic drip brewer made by Behmor, Inc., that offers the convenience of such brewers without any of the usual drawbacks—the water temperature of many auto-drip machines is often too hot or cool, the drip is uneven, and the hot plate burns the brewed pot. The Brazen allows you to adjust the water temperature and even calibrates for your location above sea level. The spray head disperses water evenly over the grounds in the gold filter during the presoak and brew cycle, and there is no hot plate, because the thermal carafe keeps the coffee hot for quite a while.

I really like the Brazen. The clear directions made it easy to calibrate. The results were outstanding: a clean, smooth cup, with flavor notes similar to the Wave Dripper. The only drawback is the lengthy brewing cycle. For a full carafe, it took six minutes for the water to heat and another six minutes before the beep announced that the drip brew was complete. Of course, you could pre-grind your coffee and set it to brew automatically at a chosen time, but I prefer to grind just before brewing.

You can't go wrong with any of these four brewers. No disrespect to Manlio Marzetti, but sometimes progress in design means getting back to basics. And they'll certainly look less threatening on your countertop. *Mark Pendergrast is author of Uncommon Grounds, a history of coffee.*

