

Coffee stirs Old World memories

THE LORE of coffee is as heartwarming and satisfying as its flavor and aroma.

What makes coffee so appealing? Peter Castellano, a professional coffee taster for the Nestle Co., believes that the allure of coffee lives in its Old World charm.

"Few beverages are steeped in exotic legend," said Castellano. "And improved processing and the choice of gourmet beans have made coffee a modern-day delicacy."

Rituals surrounding coffee drinking have been around for centuries. An Abyssinian (Ethiopian) tale ascribes coffee's invention to a goatherd whose flock grew frolicsome when feeding on certain berries. He brought the berries to a local abbot who, mystified, experimented with the beans — grinding them and brewing them into a delicious drink which, he declared, brought a rebirth of his spirit.

Coffee's fame spread quickly, and with it, the planting of coffee trees. Wherever the coffee bean traveled, it was received with a mixture of delight and suspicion. Venetian merchants introduced coffee to Western Europe, after having enjoyed it on their journeys east. Doctors praised

it as an elixir but churchmen scorned it as the "devils brew." It was only after the pope drank a cup and acknowledged it as a divine beverage, that coffee became a welcome import.

AT FIRST, coffee was a popular item for street vendors in Europe in the 1600s. As these peddlers prospered, they opened coffeehouses, sensing a need for informal, yet sober, gathering places, where information and ideas could be exchanged.

But the introduction of coffee into Europe was not without pitfalls. Women began complaining that men were never to be found at home during times of domestic crises since they were always at the coffeehouses.

The "kaffeeklatsch" was the German women's protest against exclusion from the coffeehouses. The custom began in the early 1800s when neighborhood women spontaneously congregated at home over pots of coffee to have their own discussion of worldly issues.

Coffee had become a popular drink associated with the conviviality of coffeehouses and hospitality in

one's home.

After the Boston Tea Party, coffee became a patriotic symbol to Americans. The coffee-drinking habit went west in covered wagons out to the new frontier. By the 1900s the sound of the coffee grinder crushing beans could be heard in homes across the country just around breakfast time.

And following World War II, the American work force instituted coffee breaks as a symbol of the rights of laborers to be treated fairly.

Today the average American consumes more than 15 pounds of coffee each year. Only residents of Scandinavia, Iceland and the United Arab Emirates drink more coffee per day than Americans or West Europeans.

CONSUMPTION IN coffee-loving Scandinavia rises dramatically on Dec. 13. In Sweden the Christmas holidays begin with hot coffee and buns served at dawn on St. Lucia's Day to honor the Saint of Light. The Swedish people have welcomed Christmas in this manner since medieval times, when a family's eldest daughter, as "Lucia Queen," would serve her relatives coffee in bread with yeast-raised

buns called "Lussekatter."

Today, St. Lucia's Day is mainly a family celebration, but there are festivities outside the home as well. Big cities and provinces elect Lucia queens who reign for the entire year. And on Dec. 13, Lucia's queens bring hot coffee and warm smiles to hospital patients. Proceeds from Lucia's Day festivities and parades go to charitable organizations.

Swedish communities in the United States still welcome the holidays with coffee and Lussekatter in celebration of their ancient tradition.

You don't have to be snowed in for Christmas — as they are in Sweden — to love coffee. Here are a few recipes to warm up your holidays.

TASTY ALMOND CAFE

1½ cups boiling water
2 Tbsp. instant coffee
2½ Tbsp. almond flavored liqueur
2 tsp. sugar
¼ cup heavy cream

In large cup or heatproof pitcher, combine boiling water, coffee, almond-flavored liqueur and sugar; stir until coffee dissolves. Add

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