

# Extreme Coffee

Discover the delightful art of drinking *ca phe sua* in Vietnam, a redefinition of that black “caffeine fix”, according to Chris Canty.

**M**y 2006 resolution is this: I’m going to give up drinking coffee because it’s taking over my life. It hasn’t happened yet – I’m working on it.

Before arriving in Vietnam, coffee to me meant sitting in a warm café, sipping on a flat white and reading a newspaper.

Now it’s me sitting on a newspaper in a gutter, avoiding motorbikes so as to not become a flat white guy, while holding

– with shaking fingers – what is perhaps the strongest coffee in the world. I’m addicted.

## COFFEE APPARATUS

Drinking Vietnamese coffee is an art form, involving an assortment of steel contraptions that must be used precisely and in a specific order, much like a high school science class. While most servers will prepare the coffee for you, some traditional places let the drinker

work the filter themselves, so this ritual is something you must learn quickly if you want to have your cuppa there.

Start by pouring a small amount of smooth, creamy condensed milk into an empty glass. A filter, resembling an oversized Monopoly piece (the hat), is placed over the glass. Unscrew the flat top filter, and put one to seven teaspoons of coffee (depending on your emotional state) into the hat. Then, securely fix the top filter over the coffee. (You still with me?)

Next, pour very hot water into the hat, and if all goes smoothly, a solitary drop should silently hit the condensed milk in about 30 seconds. A gruelling five minutes later, your *ca phe sua* is ready.

For most people there is a 13-second pause before the coffee takes affect. First, a 15-second feeling of enthusiasm, followed by 30 seconds of vacant staring, then six hours of light-headedness and noticeable shaking. Don’t even dream of going to sleep for at least a day.

## STREETSIDE CA PHE CULTURE

Most Vietnamese drink their coffee on the street in small glasses for VND5,000 (SGD0.45) just after dawn while perched on stools the size of their motorbike helmets.

Drinking coffee on the street has been popular for the last century, shortly after the French started to harvest trees in the central highlands. It is drunk widely throughout the country – Vietnam’s second largest producer of coffee in the world – especially in the big cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where street stalls are dotted around every corner.



Sip some *ca phe sua* by the streets of Vietnam... a delightful experience not to be missed!



“romantic and stylish” coffee houses have arisen to facilitate a socialising venue for dating among the “nouveau” Vietnamese. Located on house boats, the top of high-rise buildings, and under garden marquees, they have also proven popular with heat-sensitive expats and tourists seeking air-conditioned comfort and Western-style coffees.

### THE CAT’S CONTRIBUTION

While Westerners order their double decaf espresso with a hint of cream, the locals have taken to the humble cappuccino.

Others come to Vietnam to search for the legendary ca phe cut chon, meaning

Fox Dung Coffee, which is derived (so to speak) from the civet cat. It’s actually a relative of the mongoose which eats fallen coffee beans from the coffee tree and poos out the best (or most sturdy) beans that remain intact through their digestion tract. Then lucky people inspect the ground and collect the poo.

While the coffee was easy to find 70 years ago, since the destruction of the civets’ natural habitat and a sudden fondness for fox meat and fur, cats and coffee are now a rarity. (Don’t forget this is the cat whose meat reportedly started SARS.)

While coffee sellers peddle “weasel poo” coffee, it is normal

coffee that has been put through chemical treatment to resemble the cat’s digestion process. Man on the moon... and now this.

In Buon Me Thuot, stalls are covered with boxes bearing the civet cat’s image, claiming to sell the genuine stuff, yet most consider it a ploy to get tourists.

Alas, even some well-known coffee exporters have yet to see the real thing, although those who have say it is known for its chocolaty aftertaste, which perhaps makes sense, considering it comes from a cat’s... Umm, let’s not probe any further.

Having coffee in Vietnam is anything but boring. There is a wide variety, and I’ll bet it is probably the strongest coffee on this planet. Resolution-breakingly addictive too – so I might think twice about that New Year’s resolution after all. **Tiger Tales**

**\* TIGER AIRWAYS FLIES TO DANANG, HANOI AND HO CHI MINH CITY IN VIETNAM FROM SINGAPORE. BOOK YOUR TICKETS AT WWW.TIGERAIRWAYS.COM**



In Buon Me Thuot, where the bulk of coffee is grown, coffee trade is an industry in itself. Most people drink a glass before work, and another at lunch. Interestingly, ordering a takeaway coffee is unheard of, due to the street-drinking culture.

Strangely, while coffee is drunk on the streets, people mostly drink tea at home. Beware though, that tea too, contains enough caffeine to kill a horse and its rider.

Those who prefer to take coffee home can buy vacuum-sealed packs (VND10,000 or SGD1.06 per 100g) or the naked beans (as low as VND5,000 or SGD0.53 per 100g), which are ground in front of you. A few specialist coffee bean shops exist around the cities, displaying glass vases of its variety.

### THE BUSINESS OF CA PHE

Vietnam consumes huge amounts of coffee, basically because huge amounts are grown. Vietnam now sits behind Brazil in the race

for the world’s leading coffee grower, with an astonishing 600,000 tons of coffee worth over USD690 million sold in the 2004-2005 crop (mostly to the US). Today, Vietnam is the world’s leading exporter of Robusta coffee, a bitter-tasting blend that is sold to companies such as Nestle and Kraft Foods.

Coffee exports increased in the ‘90s, mainly due to the World Bank’s thinking in 1995 that the humble “coffee tree” would lead this country out of debt. It has not quite worked that way, but at least coffee has created increased work productivity, demolishing the need for a “midday nap”.

Recently, upmarket coffee houses have sprung up everywhere. Vietnam’s answer to Starbucks, Trung Nguyen Coffee, has opened over 400 branches since 1996. Interestingly, the new Viet coffee chain Papa Joe’s Coffee looks identical to Starbucks.

While drinking coffee in public was once the domain of the male species, new