Holiday Drinks & Entertaining Guide

50 GREAT GIFT IDEAS
22 FESTIVE RECIPES

SAVING THE SAZERAC IN NEW ORLEANS

THE TRUTH ABOUT SHERRY

HOW TO ROAST YOUR OWN COFFEE
Heat wave

Backyard coffee roasters take their morning cup into their own hands

Story by ANNA MANTZARIS
Photographs by DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCELLI & AMY WHITEHOUSE
Thanks to Eddie Dove’s home-roasting itch, his co-workers have an alternative to what he’s deemed “the swill in the kitchen.” Each weekday, Dove fills up three thermoses with his home-roasted brews before making the 75-mile drive from his Long Beach, Miss., home to his downtown New Orleans office. When he arrives, he writes selections—which might include a Full City Brazil Jacu Bird coffee—on the wipeboard behind his desk, and he offers cups to office mates waiting for their morning coffee fix. Dove, 41, who works in the energy sector, goes through several pounds of pale green-hued raw beans a week. (He accepts cash donations from co-workers.) He’s used a variety of popcorn poppers and several roasting machines—Genesis’ Gene Café, a smokeless Nesco/Zach & Dani’s and a Hottop drum roaster. Now he primarily roasts over a gas grill in a 6-pound RK roasting drum.

Dove got into home roasting a year and a half ago after a fateful business trip. He brewed Starbucks coffee in his hotel one morning. Then, on his way to work, he stopped by a Starbucks for a store-brewed cup. “But theirs didn’t taste the same as mine,” he recalls. “I wanted to know why.” He searched the Web for brewing information and ended up on sweetmarias.com, a home roasting supply site, where he discovered the concept of roasting at home. He ordered green beans and bought two popcorn poppers on Ebay.

Dove says that, like other home roasters, his self-education is a never-ending journey. He thinks he does a fine job but, he says, there’s still room for improvement. Now he even has his own blog, southcoffeeroaster.blogspot.com, where he posts photos and descriptions of his roasts and product reviews of roasters.

Last Easter, Dove set a goal to roast 12 pounds in his 1/2-pound Gene Café for himself and friends. “After the first batch, the roaster broke,” he says. So he built a drum roaster on the spot using tips he learned online and put it on top of his barbecue grill. “In about 30 minutes I threw that sucker together and got to roasting.” He’s yielded some great brews, but his focus is on the process. “I probably enjoy roasting the coffee even more than I enjoy consuming it,” he says. “The smell, the aroma, the heat—it may be 100 degrees outside, but I love it.” He likes roasting all bean varieties but his favorites come from Guatemala, Ethiopia, Java and Mexico. He hopes to open his own roastery one day, but he doesn’t obsess over making a perfect cup every time. “Burn some beans and you’ll learn something,” he says. “Take some notes along the way.”

Vicki Fox Smith isn’t afraid to say she has “an odd, sorta trailer park way to roast.” The 55-year old Red Deer, Alberta, mental health case manager has her low-carb diet to thank for her unusual roasting method: in a bread machine with a heat gun. “There were [home roasters] using bread machines in combination with turbo ovens, [but it’s] expensive,” says Smith, who had shelved her bread machine after forgoing loaves in favor of her waistline. “It occurred to me that I could repurpose.” She did so with a fire extinguisher by her side. Her method: place beans in bread machine, set the machine on dough cycle and apply heat with a 1500-watt gun. “I don’t know if I was the first person to do a heat-gun bread machine, but I think I’ve turned a lot of people [on] to bread machine roasting,” says Smith, a St. Louis native who began home roasting two years ago after moving to Red Deer, where she was unable to find coffee that suited her palate.

Along with practical warnings (it’s messy, smoky and there is the possibility of burning down your house), Smith provides a detailed FAQ and photos of her equipment, which includes a beer fridge—used as a base for the bread machine—and a fire extinguisher. It’s a reference for adventurous roasters who aren’t afraid to step outside of the norm—our of the house, even in chilly Alberta. Smith roasts twice a week in her unheated, detached garage.

Though she roasts year-round, even when the temperature drops below zero, Smith keeps seasonality in mind when ordering her beans from Sweet Maria’s. “Some people build these huge stashes, but I like

It’s a typical lazy Sunday in Long Beach, Miss., and Eddie Dove is firing up the backyard grill.

On any other weekend, the aroma of sizzling barbecue or burgers would fill the air, but on this day the smell of fresh-roasted coffee drifts across the yard. Instead of meats and veggies, Dove’s massive gas grill holds a roasting drum filled with green coffee beans, and as he turns the drum, the coffee slowly begins to cook. For Dove, this is coffee roasting. And he’s not alone. A growing legion of adventurous coffee enthusiasts who aren’t satisfied with buying coffee in a store are taking matters into their own hands, roasting raw coffee beans using everything from popcorn poppers to skillets and gas ovens. While a decade ago this practice may have seemed slightly absurd, today people of all walks are trying it out, with surprisingly great results.
the idea that at different times of the year, different coffees are available,” she says. Her favorites are African beans, such as Ethiopian Yirgacheffe. Like other home roasters, she tends to change up her methods, roasting some varieties more deeply than others.

As a woman with a gun who isn’t afraid to turn up the heat, Smith admits she’s in the minority. “There are certainly a lot more men [home roasting],” she says, adding that they still share a common thread. “We’re all sort of geeky—we get caught up in this.”

And Smith’s roasting has brought her more than just good brews. When she applied for a job with the Canadian Mental Health Association, her interviewer suggested they meet for coffee. “I said, ‘Why don’t you come here to my house because I make better coffee than any place.’ We went out to my garage and roasted coffee as part of my job interview.” Yes, she got the job.

Steven Shaw in his New York City kitchen with his i-Roast.

**How to roast your own**

One of the easiest ways to roast coffee at home is with a hot-air popcorn popper, and this is a great method for those just getting into home roasting. Sweet Maria’s Tom Owen, who sells green beans and supplies through his online store, sweetmarias.com, recommends the old West Bend Poppery I machines, which go for up to $50 on Ebay. Poppery II’s can be snagged for a couple of bucks at thrift stores or yard sales. Not all poppers are safe to use. See Owen’s Web site for detailed information. —A.M.

1) Purchase good-quality green beans. It’s all about freshness—no roast process can improve the quality of green coffee. Tom suggests roasting beans that are less than 6 months old, and warns against buying old coffee on Ebay.

2) Roast in a well-ventilated area or outdoors, such as on a porch. Indoors, a smoky darker level roast can set off smoke detectors, and fire is always a possibility. Don’t leave the popper unattended while it’s plugged in.

3) Pour coffee beans in the machine’s trough, where popcorn kernels are poured. Check information on your popper model for the amount of beans to use per batch (equivalent to kernel capacity). Place a large bowl in front of the machine, where you would catch popcorn.

4) Attach hood and plug in the machine.

5) After about 3 to 6 minutes, the beans will emit a cracking sound. This is called “first crack.” Continue to monitor the beans for another 1 to 3 minutes (for a city/medium roast; longer for a darker roast), noticing smell, sounds and color. During roasting, the beans will smoke and their skins, or chaffes, will be expelled from the machine, into the bowl. Unplug the machine when the beans reach your desired darkness (light for a more natural taste, dark for a smokier brew).

6) Pour beans out of the machine and spread on a cookie sheet or in a colander to cool. Let them rest for 12 hours, or overnight.

7) Beans are best ground and brewed within a day after roasting, but can be sealed and shelved for up to eight days.

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- Coffee Bean Corral coffeebeancorral.com
- The Coffee Project coffeeproject.com
- Greencoffee.coop greencoffee.coop
- Sweet Maria’s sweetmarias.com

**Other Resources**

- coffeegeek.com
- homemasters.org
- NeedCoffee.com

**The Foodie**

“Coffee to me is a type of food,” says Steven Shaw, 38, author of Turning the Tables: The Insider’s Guide to Eating Out and co-founder of the culinary site egullet.org. Shaw, who makes his own vanilla extract and the worst home roasted coffee begins.”

Shaw, who roasts twice a week, totaling about two pounds a month, or 25 pounds a year, in his windowless kitchen, tackles the smoky process by placing his i-Roast on a cutting board under his stove’s extractor hood. He calls his method a “set-it-and-forget-it operation” and says that home roasting is easy after the first five or 10 times, once you determine your settings and formula. “Once you get into it, it’s like changing the toilet paper. It’s not a big task.”

The only downside: he says he’s ruined now for enjoying coffee outside of his home—with the exceptions of a fellow home roaster’s house and La Colombe in Philadelphia, which he believes has the best coffee on the East Coast. And store-bought roasted beans? Forget about it. “The worst home roasted coffee is going to be better than anything you’ve gotten from the supermarket,” says Shaw, referring to stale, mass-roasted beans. “The top level of the supermarket ends where the worst home roasted coffee begins.”

Amy Whitehouse

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