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Cold Brew & Nitro Coffee on Tap for Growth



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Coffee infused with nitrogen served from a draught tap is just one type of cold brew that is expanding this ever-growing category of coffee. Both in café settings and in ready-to-drink retail, cold brew and nitro coffees are quickly becoming new customer favourites.

By Rachel Northrop



Cold Brew and Nitro Coffee on Tap for Growth

Image courtesy of Nobl Cold Brew

The umbrella term “cold brew” refers to a full category of coffees produced through cold, rather than hot, water extraction. These cold coffees can be bottled, boxed, canned and kegged; served straight or with dairy or non-dairy milks, sugar, flavouring, carbonation and nitrogen additives.

Extracting coffee using cold water opens a range of new possibilities for coffee. Decreased bitterness, increased sweetness, and the smooth mouthfeel delivered by these emerging cold brewed beverages are drawing avid drinkers of other beverages into the coffee sphere.

Myriad Cold Coffee Formats

Three and a half years ago, Connor Roelke was planning to open a brewery after having graduated from the University of New Hampshire. But he took a step back and saw that New England’s craft beer market was starting to look saturated. Nitrogen-infused cold brew coffee that poured like a draught beer with the rich mouthfeel of a sweet dessert and a kick of caffeine, however, there looked to be room for.

Roelke launched Nobl Cold Brew, today based out of Exeter, New Hampshire in 2015, using a nitro kegerator system he built in his college dormitory. He sold nitro cold brew coffee at farmers markets and to his first wholesale accounts. From there business exploded. “Consumers were drinking so much of this product that we couldn’t keep up,” Roelke told *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal*.

Introducing nitro cold brew coffee on tap required some sampling and customer education, but ultimately it is familiar enough to consumers who already like both coffee and draft beer. Convenience is as important to café owners in preparing cold brew for café service (from concentrates or nitro tap) as it is to consumers purchasing more ready-to-drink (RTD) cold brew – the less prep work, the more attractive. “Nobl is the manufacturer, distributor, and equipment provider,” explained Roelke. “We take [the refrigerated keg] to the café, restaurant, or juice bar and do all the assembly to make it as hands-off as possible for the customer.”

S&D Coffee and Tea in Concord, North Carolina has found other formats of cold brew to be just as appealing to retailers, particularly those prioritizing convenience. “At S&D, we’ve seen the most growth in concentrates in the past year,” said Pam Everett, director of insights and product strategy for S&D. “Many in the industry are seeking to capture the cold brew trend in an operationally easy approach that requires a low labour cost. Having a solid base cold brew concentrate allows both the operator and the consumer to customize their cold brew beverage to their liking.”

Cold Manufacturing Process

As more coffee companies venture into producing cold brew and nitro coffee, Roelke offers the following reminder: “Being a beverage manufacturer is a completely different business than coffee roasting.”

The business of manufacturing cold coffee beverages is being studied both by industry stakeholders and researchers in academic institutions. *An Investigation of the Shelf Life of Cold Brew Coffee and the Influence of Extraction Temperature Using Chemical Microbial and Sensory Analysis* was published in August 2018 by Samuel Nicholas Lopane of Clemson University. The study examined the shelf-life of coffee extracted using both hot and cold water by analysing sensory and chemical profiles as well as microbial growth.

According to Lopane, who presented at the 27th ASIC (Association for Science and Information on Coffee) Conference in Portland, Oregon in September 2018, “extracting, or brewing coffee is the attempt to pull as many pleasing flavours from the bean into the cup in order to create a balanced and tasty beverage [...] Extraction controls not just the concentration of the beverage, but also the chemical identity.”

Lopane’s study found that “the shelf life of refrigerated cold and hot brewed coffee is limited not by microbial stability, but rather by deterioration in sensory attributes.” Maintaining cold brewed coffee at refrigerated temperature eliminates the growth of mold or bacteria that could shorten shelf life, making sensory attributes the most relevant indicator of staling or aging in cold brewed coffee products.

This explains why Roelke’s choice to focus on the service aspect of Nobl is a major component of the company’s rapid growth. “We are the most full-service model that we can be,” he said, in everything from fridge maintenance to quality of the cold brew, ▸

Nobl Cold Brew served nitro cold brew coffee at farmers markets when it first launched in 2015.



Consumers are drawn to attributes in cold brew and nitro coffee that are often missing in conventional hot coffee, such as lower acidity and more sweetness.



Image courtesy of S&D Coffee & Tea

doing things like “producing kegs the day before we deliver, which is something we couldn’t do if we worked with a distributor.”

The café space is often where consumers first interact with cold brew coffee, which is why Roelke noted that Nobl works to provide “absolute quality, absolute convenience, with the same product safety and sanitation from a larger manufacturer” to retail accounts. But cold brew is now as common in the grocery store as it is at the local coffee shop. S&D’s Everett sees that “cold brew is present in both formats and there has been a tremendous influx of participants in the retail sector. We see growth in both areas, not necessarily a shift from one to the other. The café products are evolving, as cold brew is becoming a catalyst for experimentation with texture and format.”

While experimentation within cold brew indicates the chance for new niche markets and product lines to form, in his paper Lopane stresses to cold brew manufacturers that “in order to ensure safety, good manufacturing practices, preventative controls, and maintenance of the cold chain are recommended for all producers of cold brew coffee.”

Consumer Demand Increases

Because of the different skill sets and equipment necessary for coffee roasting and for beverage manufacturing, co-packing is an excellent option for producing cold brew products. “From Portland, Maine to Boston, [our café accounts] had really strong relationships with the roasters they work with,” said



Roelke of Nobl’s decision to launch nitro cold brew products using local roasters’ coffee and branding. “Here are the brands that you know and love; you know that the coffee they roast is phenomenal, now you can trust Nobl to deliver the cold brew.”

Specifically, consumers are drawn to attributes that are sometimes missing in conventional hot coffee preparations. “People really want access to cold brew coffee with lower acidity, more sweetness,” and nitro coffee on tap, according to Roelke, “is the best way.”

Claims of cold brew’s lower acidity and higher

sweetness were part of what Lopane sought to investigate in his research. Cold extracted coffees were found to be different beverages entirely from coffees extracted at high temperatures, both in chemical and sensory terms. Ultimately, cold brewers' claims were supported by Lopane's findings. "The cold brewed coffees had higher sweetness and lower bitterness than the hot extracted coffee, supporting claims made by producers of cold brew. Additionally, the cold brewed coffees had greater flavour stability over the storage time than the hot brewed treatment," he wrote. The scope of Lopane's study did not include nitrogen-infused coffee, demonstrating how much research is left to be done to explore the optimal format to deliver new cold coffee products to consumers presented with ever more beverage options.

"Nitro, carbonated, functional and even citrus variants of cold brew are expanding the variety of cold coffee options available in a café setting while alt-dairy, flavoured and lightly sweetened cold brew options show up with high frequency in the grab-and-go retail space," said Everett of S&D's observations of cold brew's recent performance as a category.

The sensory stability of flavours in refrigeration of cold brew, while varying between pure coffee and coffee with the additives Everett mentioned, is one aspect that fuels cold brew's popularity among retailers and consumers. "We see continued growth in both sectors as consumers view these options as alternatives to both carbonated soft drinks and traditional hot coffee drinks."

Cold brew, and the many iterations of it, is establishing itself as a category that occupies the sweet spot between hot and cold, between healthy and indulgent. Or, perhaps product development has come



full circle and hot nitrogen infused coffee is the next alternative. "Nobl launched our hot draft coffee in late 2017," Roelke said. The company has installed full-service draft coffee bars, including hot options, in several hotel lobbies with positive results.

Creating new coffee formats comes down to what customers enjoy enough to come back for. The more variations on coffee available in more formats means more people who find the perfect drink in a cup of coffee – whether that cup is in fact a can, nitro poured from a tap, or a bottle of carbonated cold coffee with citrus. ■


Cold brew is now as common in the grocery store as it is in the local coffee shop.

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