



Coffee buzz still brewing

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When CCTV anchorman Rui Chenggang famously drummed up animosity against the Forbidden City Starbucks in 2007, a nation seemed united in ousting the Western import. But as Starbucks celebrates the opening of its 100th café in Beijing (and the second Starbucks to open within the Solana shopping and business complex), it's clear this aborted Boston Tea Party has held little sway with the contemporary Chinese consumer.

Starbucks, just one example of the cluster of coffee companies capitalizing on the trend in China, is opening new coffee shops in China at a breakneck rate of one every four days in a push to open more than 1,500 by 2015. By 2014, Starbucks estimates China will be its second largest market.

Fourth quarter sales (ending September 30) in stores open at least 13 months spiked 10 percent in the China and Asia Pacific region, according to a report from the Wall Street Journal yesterday. Annual sales for the chain in China are 5.5 million yuan (\$886,000), up from 3.2 million yuan in 2008.

Experts say China's coffee market will grow to 1 trillion yuan within the decade. In 2011, the coffee market was at 2.7 billion yuan, according to research firm Euromonitor International.

Decade of growth

It's a trend that local businessman Safi Malik has watched over the past decade. He's a New Yorker who lives and works in Beijing as owner of Shangri La, a cooperative coffee farm and business in Yunnan Province. Malik originally came to China in 2003, when, he says, "Nobody really knew what coffee was."

Commenting on the speed with which Chinese consumers have embraced coffee, Malik says, "It is definitely taking root in the culture as we speak."

Hu Suyi, a 24-year-old from

Huangshan, Anhui Province, said that she's preferred coffee since she was 10. "I usually begin my day with a cup of coffee," she says. "I find the smell and taste helps me settle into my day."

She learned the habit from her parents, and admits that she's hooked. Whenever she misses her daily ritual, she gets caffeine withdrawal headaches.

Li Dan, the 28-year-old manager of Miss Me Café in Lido, Chaoyang district, says around half of her customers are Chinese. Most of the

customers are of the younger generation, who she sees drinking "more than three cups a day."

Any coffee with your sugar?

While the three-cup habit is soaring to jittery new heights, Chinese tastes still differ.

Li says her Chinese clientele prefers mochas and cappuccinos over straight cups of coffee.

Malik says he sees customers love putting extras into his brews. "Chinese people still like their coffee diluted with lots of milk," Malik says.

Despite all the buzz over coffee, China remains a nation of tea-heads. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) even questions the health benefits of caffeinated drinks like coffee, asserting that caffeine creates an imbalance of energy in the body by bolting the nervous system and raising blood pressure.

Health aid or hazard, coffee culture still has a ways to go before becoming the norm in China, according to Malik.

"Most [Chinese customers] don't even know how to make their own cup," he says. "You wouldn't believe how many customers come to me complaining that their coffee doesn't dissolve when they add hot water to beans in a cup."

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