

The Best Coffeemakers

A roundup of the top brewers on the market today BY SAM GUGINO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI



All part of a balanced breakfast: The drip-style Clubline KB 741, made by Dutch manufacturer Technivorm, produced a delicious, superbly balanced cup, and was the highest rated coffeemaker in our tests.



This glass-beaker eight-cup French press from Bodum makes a very robust cup of coffee, the kind that would appeal to espresso fans.

Despite the legions who frequent espresso bars and carry out their grande non-fat lattes, most Americans drink regular coffee at home. But these days we're not settling for just any old cup of joe. The increase in the quality and variety of coffee has spawned a concomitant increase in the number of coffeemakers, primarily in the drip and French press styles. From water purification systems to timers that tell you how long it has been since the coffee was brewed, machines today have every conceivable feature, except one that shakes you out of bed in the morning.

In the housewares department at Zabar's in New York there are more coffeemakers than any other type of appliance. "Last February we had over 120 coffeemakers, so we discontinued some that weren't selling well," said housewares buyer Melen Ham. "But as soon as we did, people came in looking for them."

Still, you don't need any fancy doo-dads on your coffeemaker for a great cup of java. My favorite coffeemaker among the seven I tested was one of the simplest, the Clubline KB 741 by Dutch manufacturer Technivorm. The Clubline is a drip machine, the most familiar type of coffeemaker. It works by heating water from a holding tank and spraying it over grounds in a filter-lined brew basket. While the basic system hasn't changed appreciably since before Joe DiMaggio was hawking Mr. Coffee, a myriad of special features have become available.

Drip Coffee Features

About three years ago, insulated pots were introduced. These pots can have double walls, Styrofoam filling or the more effective vacuum seal to retain heat. (Warming plates more often

than not cook the coffee.) For the time-deprived couple Cuisinart has Two to Go (\$50), which brews coffee into two sleek 14-ounce stainless-steel travel mugs.

Because coffee beans lose their flavor rapidly once ground, coffeemakers with attached grinders such as the Capresso CoffeeTeam Luxe (\$200) and Cuisinart Grind and Brew (\$99) are showing up. A coffeemaker that can be preset to have your coffee ready for you when you wake up isn't a new idea, but these do remain popular. However, for true coffee aficionados, programmable machines that require coffee to be ground hours ahead are a no-no. But the Capresso CoffeeTeam Luxe and Cuisinart Grind and Brew overcome this problem with programmable grinders.

Because coffee is mostly water, consumers are expressing a preference for coffeemakers with water purifiers, usually charcoal. "People are more aware of bottled versus tap water," says Mary Rogers of Cuisinart. "And the better the water, the better the coffee."

The espresso craze has spilled over into the coffeemaker world too. Capresso, which, according to Ham, is a comer in the coffee machine market, has a milk frother attached to its CoffeeTec

machine (\$200), for faux lattes and cappuccinos.

Brown paper filters, which allegedly impart fewer chemicals than white filter papers, are now common. But Ted Lingle, executive director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), an industry group based in Long Beach, Calif., says brown paper is a gimmick. In fact, the quality of both brown and white paper has deteriorated, according to Lingle. Instead, he suggests using a permanent mesh filter of either gold or nylon, which allows more flavor components to be leached from the coffee, much like unfiltered wine. The result is an earthier, denser and more complex cup.

French Press Pots and Vacuum Systems

French press coffee pots work by mixing coarsely ground coffee with hot water in a glass or plastic beaker. The mixture is stirred and allowed to sit for two to five minutes. Then grounds are pressed to the bottom of the beaker with a plunger. While these coffeemakers allow you the most control over the brewing process, they require more human involvement, something you may or may not want at 6 a.m. Involvement also applies to cleaning out the grounds, a messier task than with automatic drip systems.

For years there was no way to keep French pressed coffee hot. Now companies such as Bodum, Bonjour, Frieling and Thermos have press systems inside insulated containers. The problem with insulated (and noninsulated) pots is that the pressed coffee grounds stay in contact with the coffee at the bottom of the pot after the brewing cycle has finished, and bitter components come out, much like with overextracted espresso. To avoid this, pour French pressed coffee into a separate insulated container.

Vacuum coffeemakers are a tiny segment of the coffeemaker market. These off-center, hourglass-shaped machines look like escapees from a high school chemistry lab. The top chamber contains coffee, the bottom water. When the water is heated, it shoots up into the top chamber, mixes with the grounds and drips back into the lower chamber. They are a pain to clean, though the two chambers are made of unbreakable polycarbonate.

Test Results

Despite the plethora of bells and whistles, what you really need to make good coffee can be summed up in one word—wattage. “Most coffeemakers don’t get water hot enough, and that’s because they don’t have enough power, or wattage,” Lingle says. “You need at least 1,250 watts. But most coffeemakers have less than 1,200.” Lingle says higher wattage also provides more

“turbulence” in the brewing basket, which extracts more flavor.

Sure enough, the Clubline KB 741 (\$179, \$199 with a thermal pot), was the most powerful of the seven coffeemakers I tried, at 1,475 watts. It produced a delicious, superbly balanced cup—the kind I’d want to start my day with. The Clubline was also the fastest coffeemaker, producing eight cups in about five minutes. I also liked its smart, twin-tower look and its seven-foot cord (others were around three feet). The Clubline is one of two coffeemakers that meet the standards of the SCAA. (The other is the OCS-8 by Newco Enterprises, \$199.)

For second place among drip style coffeemakers, Cuisinart’s Brew Central (\$99), KitchenAid’s Pro 12 (\$100), both 12-cup models,

and 10-cup Cafe Euro Thermal Coffeemaker from Melitta (\$24), were very close. All produced coffee with clean and bright flavors and medium body. The Cuisinart and KitchenAid are both programmable. The Cuisinart has a superior look of black plastic and stainless steel. The KitchenAid has a brew strength adjustment dial, but it didn’t seem to make much difference.

For sheer value, it’s hard to beat the Melitta, which is simply a filter-lined cone above a thermal pot. The Melitta allows you to control the temperature of the water that is poured over the grounds. I also tested a Black & Decker 12-cup Smart Brew (\$35), which made a decent cup, though it was a step behind the others. It was also the slowest of the automatic drip makers per cup, taking over nine minutes to make eight cups. Cuisinart and KitchenAid

each took nine minutes, Melitta 10.

If you’re looking for a deeper, richer coffee, the eight-cup vacuum system is for you. At six minutes, the Starbucks Utopia vacuum coffeemaker I tested made the second fastest pot of coffee. (Starbucks is discontinuing the Utopia, but Bodum sells the same machine, called the Santos, for \$129.) My eight-cup, glass-beaker French press (\$30) made the most robust cup of coffee, the kind that would appeal to espresso lovers. And even though it took 11 minutes to brew a pot (including heating the water), that’s less time than it takes to get that grande non-fat latte at the espresso bar.

Sam Gugino, Wine Spectator’s Tastes columnist, is the author of *Low-Fat Cooking to Beat the Clock* (Chronicle Books).



The programmable KitchenAid Pro 12 turns out a great cup of coffee, as did the much simpler and value-conscious thermal coffeemaker from Melitta (right).

HOW TO GET IT

Bed, Bath and Beyond, Union, N.J., (800) 462-3966, www.bedbathandbeyond.com ♦ **Bodum**, New York, (800) 232-6386, www.bodum.com ♦ **Boyd Coffee Company**, Portland, Ore., (800) 545-4077, www.boyds.com ♦ **Broadway Panhandler**, New York, (866) 266-5927, www.broadwaypanhandler.com ♦ **Newco Enterprises**, St. Charles, Mo., (800) 325-7867, www.newcocoffee.com ♦ **Zabar's**, New York, (212) 496-1234 (inside New York), (800) 697-6301 (outside New York), www.zabars.com