

# The Honest Coffee Handbook

Everything that actually changes how your coffee tastes, and the expensive things that don't.



LODESTONE COFFEE ROASTERS

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# The Honest Coffee Handbook

Everything that actually changes how your coffee tastes, and the expensive things that don't.

## Why Your Coffee Tastes Bad

Here is the uncomfortable truth we tell people at the roastery, usually to their visible disappointment: the €900 espresso machine is not the answer. Neither is the €40 pour-over kit, on its own. Coffee is chemistry, and chemistry doesn't care what you paid.



*The problem is almost never the machine. It's what happened before the water touched the coffee.*

When brewed coffee tastes bad, it fails in one of two directions.

**Bitter, dry, ashy, tongue-coating?** That's *over-extraction*. The water stayed too long or worked too hard, and after taking everything good, it started stripping out the harsh, papery compounds that live deeper in the ground coffee.

**Sour, thin, salty, weirdly grassy?** That's *under-extraction*. The water left too much flavour behind in the grounds. It grabbed the fast-dissolving acids and ran before collecting the sugars and heavier compounds that balance them.

Every brewing decision you will ever make — grind size, water temperature, brew time, ratio, technique — is just a lever that pushes extraction in one direction or the other. That's the entire game. Once you internalise this, coffee stops being a collection of superstitions ("always pour clockwise") and becomes a system you can debug.

*"Every brewing decision is a lever that pushes extraction in one direction or the other. That's the entire game."*

**DEFINITION — Extraction** is the percentage of the ground coffee's mass that dissolves into your cup. Sweet, balanced coffee typically lands between 18% and 22%. Below that: sour. Above it: bitter. You'll never measure this at home — but you'll learn to taste it.

The chapters ahead walk through the levers in order of how much they matter. Which brings us to a spoiler: the order is not what the coffee industry's marketing budget would suggest.

# The Bean

## Freshness is a window, not a race

Roasted coffee is not best the day it's roasted. For the first several days, beans release CO<sub>2</sub> trapped during roasting — a process called *degassing* — and that gas disrupts brewing, producing wild, inconsistent cups. Filter coffee generally tastes best **7 to 21 days after roast**. Espresso often wants even longer, up to 5 weeks.

After that, the enemy is oxygen. Aromatics fade, oils go stale, and by week eight, even a spectacular coffee tastes like a memory of itself.



*Roast day at Lodestone. Coffee is a fresh product, treat it like bread, not like rice.*

***TIP** — Buying more than you'll drink in three weeks? Freeze it. Whole beans, airtight container, into the freezer on day 10. Grind straight from frozen — no thawing. Frozen storage preserves coffee remarkably well; a warm kitchen cupboard does not.*

## Reading the label

A bag that deserves your money tells you four things:

| What to look for                              | Why it matters                  | Red flag                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Roast date</b>                             | Freshness is everything         | "Best before 2028" and no roast date                          |
| <b>Origin</b> (country, region, ideally farm) | Traceability signals quality    | Just "100% Arabica" — that's like wine labelled "100% grapes" |
| <b>Process</b> (washed, natural, honey)       | Predicts flavour character      | No process listed                                             |
| <b>Roast level</b>                            | Lets you match coffee to method | Only vibes: "intense," "smooth"                               |

**Washed** coffees taste cleaner and brighter — the fruit is removed before drying. **Natural** coffees dry inside the fruit and pick up heavy berry sweetness, sometimes gloriously, sometimes like fermented jam. Neither is better. Washed Ethiopian for a Tuesday morning; natural for when you want the coffee to be an event.

## Roast level, honestly

Light roasts preserve origin character — the floral, citrus, tea-like notes that make specialty coffee interesting. Dark roasts taste primarily of *roasting*: chocolate, smoke, char. The specialty industry sneers at dark roasts more than it should. If you love them, love them. But know that past a certain darkness, you're tasting the roaster's drum, not the farmer's work — so there's little reason to pay single-origin prices for it.

*"'100% Arabica' on a label is like wine labelled '100% grapes.'  
Technically information. Practically useless."*

## Grind

If you upgrade one thing this year, upgrade your grinder. Not your kettle, not your brewer, not your beans. Your grinder.

### Why grind size runs the show

Water extracts from the surface of coffee particles. Finer grind = more surface area = faster extraction. Coarser = slower. Grind size is the throttle on the entire process, which is why it's the first thing you'll adjust when troubleshooting (Chapter 7).

But size is only half the story. The other half is **consistency**. A blade grinder — the spinning-propeller kind — produces a mix of boulders and dust. The dust over-extracts (bitter), the boulders under-extract (sour), and you get a cup that manages to fail in both directions simultaneously. No technique can fix this, because no single brew time is correct for particles that different.

## BLADE GRINDER



## BURR GRINDER



*Same bean, two grinders. The left cup will be sour and bitter at once. The right one has a chance.*

A **burr grinder** crushes beans between two cutting surfaces set a fixed distance apart, producing far more uniform particles. This is not an audiophile-cable distinction. It's the difference between coffee you can control and coffee you can only endure.

***BEST PRACTICE*** — A €40 hand grinder with steel burrs (Timemore C2 class) will outperform a €100 electric blade grinder every single time. If your budget forces a choice between a good grinder and good beans, buy the grinder and drink supermarket beans for a month. *Genuinely.*

## A working scale for grind size

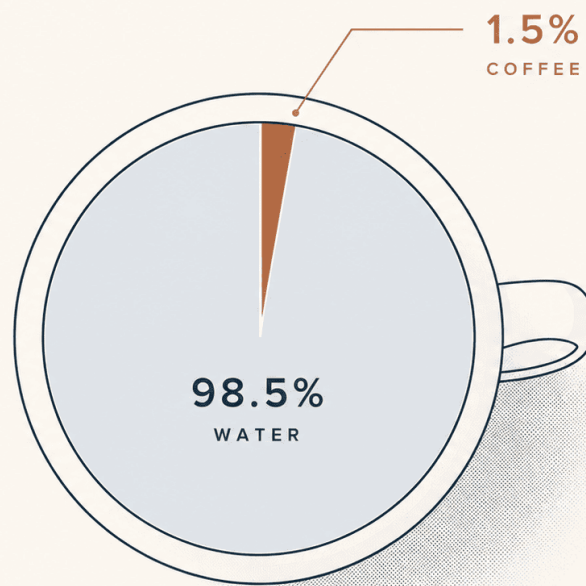
Descriptions like "medium-fine" are unhelpful without a reference. Use touch and familiar textures:

| Grind         | Feels like                 | Use for                        |
|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Coarse        | Rough sea salt             | French press, cold brew        |
| Medium-coarse | Coarse sand                | Chemex, clever dripper         |
| Medium        | Table sand                 | Batch brewer, V60 (start here) |
| Medium-fine   | Fine sand, slightly gritty | V60 (dialed), AeroPress        |
| Fine          | Table salt                 | Moka pot, espresso-adjacent    |
| Very fine     | Flour                      | Espresso, Turkish              |

Grind immediately before brewing. Ground coffee stales in minutes, not days, surface area cuts both ways.

# Water

## THE COMPOSITION OF COFFEE



*Your cup, by weight. It's strange how little we talk about the big slice.*

Brewed coffee is roughly 98.5% water. If that water tastes like a swimming pool or a limestone quarry, no bean survives it.

Two failure modes:

**Water too soft** (heavily filtered, distilled, some Scandinavian and mountain tap water): coffee tastes flat and hollow. Minerals — especially magnesium — are what actually *bind* to flavour compounds and pull them into the cup. Distilled water makes shockingly boring coffee. This surprises everyone.

**Water too hard** (much of continental Europe, including most Czech cities): high alkalinity acts as an acid buffer, flattening the bright, lively notes that make good coffee good — and scale slowly murders your kettle.

## What to actually do

You do not need a chemistry degree, just one honest assessment of your tap water:

- **Tap water tastes clean and your kettle barely scales?** Use it. You've won the geographic lottery.
- **Kettle scales white within weeks?** Brew with a basic pitcher filter (Brita-class), which reduces alkalinity. Good enough for 90% of people.
- **You've become the kind of person who reads coffee handbooks?** Buy bottled water with low mineralisation (look for dry residue around 100–150 mg/l on the label) or use remineralisation sachets like Third Wave Water in distilled water.

***INTERESTING FACT** — Water chemistry is such a rabbit hole that two scientists — Christopher Hendon and Maxwell Colonna-Dashwood — wrote an entire book about it (Water for Coffee, 2015). Their finding, compressed brutally: magnesium extracts flavour, bicarbonate buffers acidity, and the balance between them shapes the cup more than most brewing variables. You don't need the book. You need a Brita.*

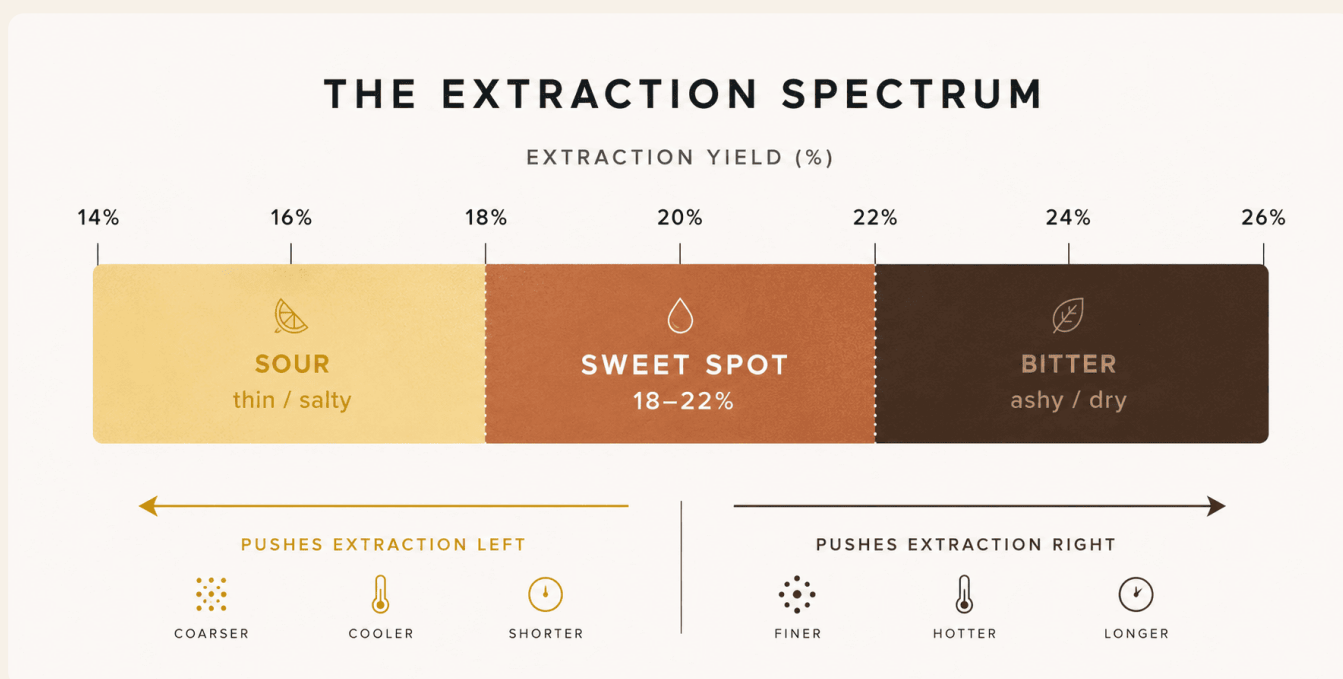
Temperature, while we're here: **92–96°C** for most brewing. Lighter roasts want the top of that range (they're denser and extract reluctantly); darker roasts want the bottom (they extract eagerly and turn bitter fast). If you have no thermometer: boil the kettle, wait 30 seconds, pour.

# Ratios & Extraction

Two numbers define every cup:

**Ratio** — how much coffee to how much water. This controls *strength* (how concentrated the cup feels).

**Extraction** — how much of the coffee dissolved. This controls *balance* (sour ↔ sweet ↔ bitter).



*The extraction spectrum. Every lever you own pushes the cup left or right along this bar.*

They are independent. You can brew a strong-but-sour cup, or a weak-but-bitter one. Most bad home coffee is actually *weak and over-extracted* — too little coffee, ground too fine, steeped too long. People taste the thinness, add even less water next time, and spiral.

## The ratios that work

Weigh your coffee. A tablespoon of light-roast beans and a tablespoon of dark-roast beans differ in mass by up to 20% — volume measurement is why your coffee is different every day.

| Method                | Ratio (coffee : water) | Example dose                  |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| V60 / pour-over       | 1:16                   | 15 g coffee → 240 g water     |
| French press          | 1:14                   | 30 g → 420 g                  |
| AeroPress             | 1:13                   | 14 g → 180 g                  |
| Moka pot              | fixed by the pot       | fill basket level, no tamping |
| Cold brew concentrate | 1:8                    | 60 g → 480 g                  |
| Batch / drip machine  | 1:16                   | 60 g → 1 L                    |

These are starting points, not commandments. Prefer stronger coffee? Move toward 1:14. Lighter? 1:17. Adjust ratio for *strength*. Adjust grind for *balance*. Keeping those two jobs separate is the single most clarifying habit in home brewing.

**COMMON MISTAKE** — *"My coffee is bitter, so I'll use less coffee." No — that makes it weak and bitter. Bitterness is over-extraction: grind coarser or shorten the brew. Strength and balance are different dials. Turning the wrong one is how people end up hating their own coffee for years.*

*"Adjust ratio for strength. Adjust grind for balance. Keep those two jobs separate, and coffee becomes debuggable."*

## The Methods



*Five brewers, five personalities. None of them is "best." One of them is best for you.*

A method is a personality, not a rank. Here's the honest matchmaking:

| Method       | Cup character           | Effort | Forgiveness | Best for                        |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| V60          | Clean, bright, delicate | High   | Low         | Tasting what a coffee <i>is</i> |
| French press | Heavy, rich, textured   | Low    | High        | Effortless weekday coffee       |

|                  |                                              |          |           |                                               |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>AeroPress</b> | Balanced,<br>adaptable                       | Medium   | High      | Travel,<br>offices, one-<br>cup<br>households |
| <b>Moka pot</b>  | Intense,<br>syrupy,<br>espresso-<br>adjacent | Medium   | Low       | Milk drinks<br>without a<br>machine           |
| <b>Cold brew</b> | Smooth,<br>sweet, low-<br>acid               | Very low | Very high | Summer,<br>sensitive<br>stomachs              |

## V60 — the honest one

The paper filter removes oils and fine sediment, producing a transparent cup where nothing hides — including your mistakes.

1. Fold the filter seam, rinse it with hot water (kills the paper taste, preheats everything), discard the rinse water.
2. 15 g coffee, medium grind. Kettle at 94°C.
3. **Bloom:** pour 45 g water, swirl gently, wait 40 seconds. The grounds swell and bubble as CO<sub>2</sub> escapes — skip this and the gas repels water, causing patchy extraction.
4. Pour the remaining water in slow spirals in two or three additions, finishing at 240 g by around 1:45.
5. Total drawdown should land between **2:30 and 3:15**. Faster? Grind finer next time. Slower? Coarser.

## French press — the misunderstood one

The press's bad reputation — muddy, bitter sludge — comes from one step everyone gets wrong: plunging hard and pouring immediately, which churns sediment into the cup.

The fix, popularised by James Hoffmann and adopted here because it simply works:

1. 30 g coarse coffee, 420 g water at 95°C. Pour, don't stir.
2. Wait 4 minutes. Stir the floating crust gently, then **scoop off the foam and floaters** with a spoon.
3. Now do nothing for another 5 minutes. Sediment sinks.
4. Press the plunger only to the surface of the liquid — it's a lid now, not a piston — and pour gently.

Nine minutes total, of which your active involvement is about forty seconds. The result is closer to a rich pour-over than to campfire sludge.

## AeroPress — the pragmatic one

Invented by Alan Adler, the man behind the Aerobie flying ring, which remains the most on-brand fact in coffee. The AeroPress is nearly indestructible, brews in ninety seconds, and tolerates error better than anything else on this list. 14 g medium-fine coffee, 180 g water at 90°C, stir, steep 90 seconds, press slowly for 30. If it's sour, go finer; bitter, coarser. People run world championships on this thing; you can run a Tuesday.

## Moka pot — the dramatic one

The moka pot is brilliant and slightly feral. Two rules tame it:

1. **Start with pre-boiled water** in the base. Cold-water starts mean the coffee sits above heat for minutes, cooking before brewing.
2. **Low flame, and pull it off early.** When the flow turns pale and starts sputtering, that's steam — remove from heat and, ideally, run the base under cold water to stop extraction dead. The last sputtering third of a moka brew is where all the burnt flavour lives.

Fill the basket level and loose. Never tamp — the pot builds pressure on its own and doesn't need your help becoming a small appliance-shaped hazard.

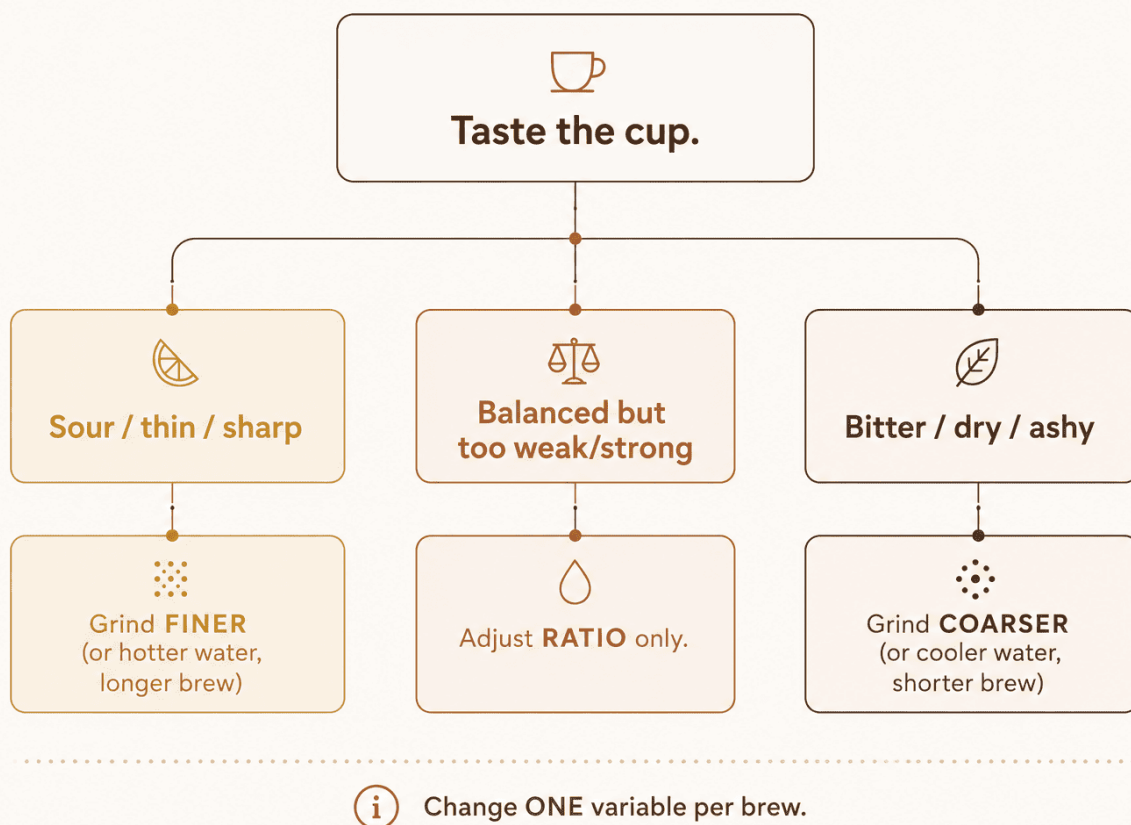
## Cold brew — the patient one

Coarse grind, 1:8 ratio, room temperature or fridge, 14–18 hours, strain through a paper filter. Dilute the concentrate 1:1 with water or milk. It's the most forgiving method in existence because cold water physically cannot extract the harsh compounds that hot water can. The trade: it also can't extract the bright, complex top notes. Cold brew makes every coffee taste smooth, and every coffee taste a bit the same.

## Dialing In

Everything in this book compresses into a loop you'll run for the rest of your coffee-drinking life:

1. Brew. 2. Taste. 3. Change one thing. 4. Repeat.



The diagnosis table:

| The cup tastes...        | Diagnosis                     | First fix                 | If that's not enough               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Sour, sharp, thin, salty | Under-extracted               | Grind finer               | Hotter water; longer contact time  |
| Bitter, ashy, drying     | Over-extracted                | Grind coarser             | Cooler water; shorter contact time |
| Balanced but watery      | Good extraction, low strength | More coffee (1:16 → 1:15) | —                                  |

|                             |                                |                                       |                               |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Balanced but heavy          | Good extraction, high strength | Less coffee (1:15 → 1:16)             | —                             |
| Both sour <i>and</i> bitter | Uneven extraction              | Better grinder; gentler, even pouring | Check for channeling / clumps |
| Flat, hollow, "fine"        | Stale beans or dead water      | Check roast date                      | Try filtered/bottled water    |

**WARNING** — *Change one variable at a time. If you adjust grind, temperature, and ratio in the same brew and the coffee improves, you've learned nothing — you can't repeat it. Slower progress in one dimension beats fast confusion in three. This is the scientific method with better-smelling equipment.*

A new bag of beans deserves two or three calibration brews before judgment. Even excellent coffee tastes mediocre at the wrong grind setting — don't blame the farmer for the grinder's opinion.

## Tasting

Tasting notes intimidate people — "stewed damson, jasmine, cola" reads like a hostage note from a farmers' market. Ignore the poetry. You only need to track four things, and you already know how to taste all of them:



*You don't need vocabulary. You need comparison. Two coffees side by side teach more than any flavour wheel.*

**Acidity** is brightness — the pleasant, juicy sharpness of biting an apple. It is *not* the wince of sourness; sourness is a defect (under-extraction), acidity is a feature. The difference: acidity comes with sweetness attached, sourness comes alone.

**Sweetness** is the marker of a well-extracted cup. Not sugar-sweet — more like the roundness of a ripe tomato versus an unripe one.

**Body** is weight on the tongue. Skimmed milk versus whole milk. French press is full-bodied; V60 is light-bodied. Neither is a virtue; it's a preference.

**Finish** is what remains 30 seconds after swallowing. Good coffee leaves sweetness or pleasant dryness. Over-extracted coffee leaves your tongue feeling like it's wearing a wool sock.

The fastest way to train your palate costs nothing: **brew two coffees side by side** and taste them against each other. Differences that are invisible alone become obvious in contrast. This is exactly how professionals cup coffee — not because their palates are superhuman, but because comparison is a lever and they know it.

*"Acidity comes with sweetness attached. Sourness comes alone. Learn that distinction and you can debug any cup by taste."*

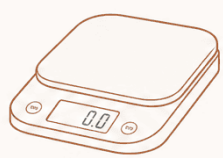
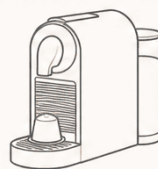
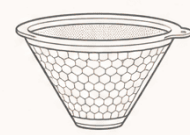


## Gear

The coffee industry sells complexity. Here is the honest shopping list, in strict order of impact:

1. **A scale (€10–20).** 0.1 g precision, any brand. This is the highest-value purchase in coffee. Consistency is impossible without it, and consistency is the prerequisite for every improvement in this book.
2. **A burr grinder (€40–90).** Hand grinders with steel burrs dominate this price range — a Timemore C2 or Comandante-style clone. Electric burr grinders worth owning start around €150; below that, a hand grinder wins.

3. A gooseneck kettle (€30–60). Only if you pour-over. The thin spout is about *control*, not aesthetics — pour rate and placement genuinely affect extraction evenness. Temperature-variable models are a luxury, not a need (the boil-and-wait-30-seconds trick is free).
4. The brewer itself (€10–40). A plastic V60 brews identically to a €70 copper one and holds temperature *better* than ceramic. The French press from the flea market works fine. Spend the difference on beans.

| BUY                                                                                 |                                                                                     | SKIP              |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
|    |    | SCALE             |    |   | CAPSULE MACHINE     |
|   |   | HAND BURR GRINDER |   |  | BLADE GRINDER       |
|  |  | GOOSENECK KETTLE  |  |  | €300 "SMART" BREWER |
|  |  | CERAMIC V60       |  |  | GOLD-PLATED FILTERS |

*The entire recommended setup costs less than a mid-range capsule machine. It will outbrew it for a decade.*

Things that change nothing: gold filters (they change the cup — more oils, more sediment — but not for the better unless you prefer press-style texture), coffee-specific storage gadgets beyond "airtight and dark," and any brewer whose main feature is Bluetooth.

**TIP** — Total cost of a genuinely excellent setup: scale + hand grinder + plastic V60 + paper filters ≈ €90. That's the entire capital expenditure. From there on, every euro should go into fresh, well-roasted beans — the only component you can't buy once.

## Quick Reference

| Method       | Ratio | Water temp      | Time            |
|--------------|-------|-----------------|-----------------|
| V60          | 1:16  | 94°C            | 2:30–3:15       |
| French press | 1:14  | 95°C            | 9:00 (Hoffmann) |
| AeroPress    | 1:13  | 90°C            | 2:00            |
| Moka pot     | fixed | pre-boiled base | pull early      |
| Cold brew    | 1:8   | cold            | 14–18 h         |

## Diagnosis

| Taste              | Fix                         |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sour / thin        | Grind finer                 |
| Bitter / ashy      | Grind coarser               |
| Weak but balanced  | More coffee                 |
| Harsh but balanced | Less coffee                 |
| Flat / dull        | Fresher beans, better water |

## Freshness

| Coffee state                 | Peak window         |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Whole beans, filter brewing  | 7–21 days off roast |
| Whole beans, frozen airtight | 6+ months           |
| Ground coffee                | ~15 minutes. Truly. |

# Now brew something worth the effort.

You've got the method. What you need now is coffee roasted this week, not this quarter.

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