

A Champ In the City Of Coffees

Espresso Olympics Are On in Seattle

By ELI SANDERS

SEATTLE, April 14 — In a bright storage room above a small bean-roasting plant in this city of coffee perfectionists, America's reigning coffee-making champion was preparing to take on the world.

Phuong Tran, an immigrant who fled the war in Vietnam as a child and won the United States Barista tries — arrive in Seattle this weekend for a worldwide coffee-making Olympics.

"I don't want to sound cocky or too confident," Ms. Tran said between practice shots (of espresso), "but I really, truly believe that we have a good chance."

The United States has never produced a barista deemed to be the planet's best, and for those Americans who have been following the run-up to the World Barista Championship — an admittedly small but passionate bunch — the question is whether Ms. Tran can beat the Scandinavians, who have dominated the annual competition since it began five years ago.

When she competes on Sunday, judges will examine everything from the color of the crema (that thin, hazelnut-colored slick that appears at the top of a well-drawn espresso shot) to the "persistence" of the foam. They will also poke around behind Ms. Tran's workstation, watching the angle of her elbow as she tamps the grounds, clocking the time it takes her to "extract" the shot — too much time makes a shot sour, too little makes it bitter — and peering into cups as she pours.

She will get 15 minutes to prepare 12 drinks: four cappuccinos, four espressos and four cups of her somewhat mysterious signature offering, the "crimson sage."

Ms. Tran does not like to reveal much about the crimson sage, for competitive reasons. But this much she will tell: It involves espresso, sugar cane juice, white pepper powder, sage leaves and crimson shot glasses.

The drink was inspired in part by the sweet sugar cane juice she drank as a child in Vietnam. Her family fled, she says, when her father, an officer in the South Vietnamese Army, was killed.

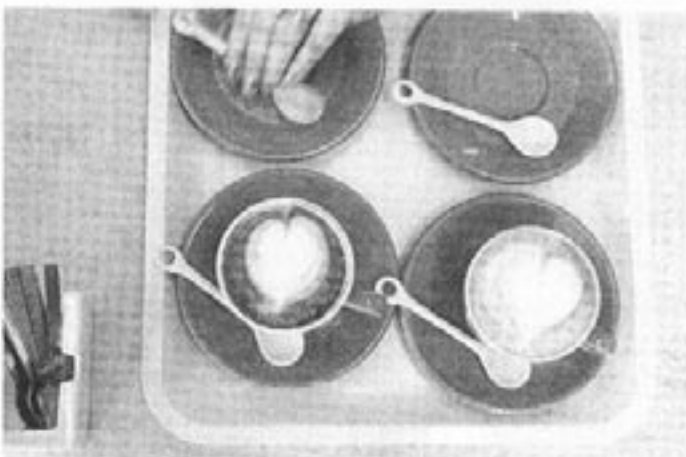
Ms. Tran, 35, hopes the crimson sage will best the Scandinavians, whose domination is attributed in part to Scandinavian winters. Those winters are longer and darker than



Photographs by Anna Wolff-Hershey for The New York Times



Phuong Tran, the American titleholder in espresso-making, practicing for the World Barista Championship, being held in Seattle this weekend. At left, leaves of the sage that goes into her specialty, the "crimson sage." Below, some more conventional fare: simple cappuccinos.



those of Seattle, home to its own fervent coffee culture and the birthplace, in 1971, of Starbucks.

Ms. Tran also worries about competition from Sammy Piccolo, two-time Canadian champion, who took second at the world contest last year, in Trieste, Italy.

"He's immaculate," she said.

In the United States, purveyors of specialty coffee — caffè lattes and the like — net \$8.4 billion a year, according to the Specialty Coffee Association of America, a sponsor of this weekend's event. The spread of Star-

bucks is a big reason for that sum, which is more than in any other country. But no Starbucks barista has ever won a United States championship, much less the world title.

This is a point of pride for independent baristas like Ms. Tran, who works as the lead trainer for Zoka Coffee, a small Seattle company that can now claim two national champions. Zoka's owner, Jeff Babcock, who hired Ms. Tran shortly after she won the national competition, said, "I can't compete against a great big company, so I beat them in the quali-

ty sector."

Mr. Babcock added, with some competitive glee, that his strategy of quality outperformance would only be helped when Starbucks moves to automated espresso machines that tamp and pour espresso shots on their own, leaving the Starbucks barista to just push a button and steam some milk. Lara Wyss, a spokeswoman for Starbucks, said an automatic machine would soon be in each of the company's 6,800 American stores.

"What we find is that it's able to pull a more consistent shot," Ms. Wyss said, "and that it is a great cup of coffee."

Mr. Babcock, a man who drinks coffee as if it were wine, sniffing before sipping, could only, well, sniff at that idea.

The other day Mr. Babcock was in Ms. Tran's training room, discussing just how many African coffee beans to add to her competition blend in order to provide her espresso some floral and fruity notes — "just to give us a little competition zing," he said.

As he worked on the blend, Ms. Tran talked about the breathing exercises she planned to do as a way of steadying her nerves — and hands — before competition. She tamped and retamped her grounds, keeping her elbow at the proper 90-degree angle to give them an even compression.

And she steamed her milk into a foam of velvet consistency, her mind on the prize: a fancy Italian espresso machine worth thousands of dollars, global fame, cushy sponsorships and the satisfaction of having made the best cup of coffee in the world.