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Starbucks to go blonde

By Emily Bryson York, MCT October 18, 2011



Starbucks is set to introduce a lighter coffee to its array of dark roasts, according to reports.

Photograph by: Handout

CHICAGO — After 40 years and millions of lattes served, Starbucks Coffee Co. is acknowledging that, for millions of Americans, their coffee flavors are too strong. So they're bringing in some blondes.

The Seattle-based java giant estimates that 40 percent of the nation's 130 million coffee drinkers prefer milder-tasting coffee, an area where Starbucks hasn't had a significant presence.

To cater to those tastes, Starbucks said Tuesday it will launch “blonde roast” coffees in January, made from milder-flavored beans and roasted for a shorter periods. In so doing, Starbucks hopes to attract new customers and get more business from its current ones.

“We have a lot of customers who love our lattes and cappuccinos, but they don’t prefer our coffee,” Starbucks global chief marketing officer Annie Young-Scriver said in a Chicago news conference Tuesday.

“If we do it right, there’s a lot of upside for us,” she said.

Young-Scriver added that the opportunity is even bigger in international markets, especially Great Britain. Starbucks will also introduce blonde roast internationally next year.

The company introduced its medium-bodied Pike Place Roast, now the default coffee served at its cafes, in 2008, as an answer to the common complaint that Starbucks coffee tasted “burnt.” Blonde-roasted coffee is yet a step lighter.

“It’s just good marketing,” Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, a New York-based consulting firm, said of the new roast. “If virtually half the people say that the more European, heavier-tasting coffee is not to their liking, why not (do it)?”

But Passikoff said he suspects that “the same people who don’t have a taste for that European blend also don’t have a taste for spending more than 99 cents on a cup of coffee.” And so they may wind up at a gas station anyway.

Bonnie Riggs, a restaurant industry analyst for the NPD Group said Starbucks is likely looking to bridge the gap between its coffee sales and those of hamburger and doughnut shops. While gourmet coffee chains like Starbucks dominate the market for specialty coffee drinks like lattes and cappuccinos, they sell only 11 percent of the brewed coffee, while hamburger and doughnut chains each have a 17 percent share, she said.

Lagging acceptance for its coffee hasn’t hampered Starbucks’ growth. The chain has reported seven straight quarters of same-store sales gains since mid-2009 despite economic uncertainty. Starbucks is working to transform itself into a “lifestyle brand,” having removed the “Starbucks Coffee” name from its logo earlier this year. It’s working to build its credentials in ready-to-eat food among other things, with plans to introduce food products for grocery stores.

Starbucks will support January’s blonde roast launch with its biggest marketing push, including national TV advertising, a tactic the company historically eschewed. The company has also repackaged its coffee for grocery stores, based on the understanding that customers spend 60 seconds deciding which coffee to buy. The bags will be labeled either “bold,” “medium” or “blonde,” to help speed decision making.