

“My grandfather didn’t like the taste of the coffee in Singapore, where it’s made by putting grounds in a cloth bag and boiling them a good long time.” Masanobu Kono, President of Kono Syphon Co., Ltd.

Masanobu Kono was reminiscing about his grandfather Akira Kono, who invented the coffee syphon.

While working as an assistant at Kyushu Imperial University’s College of Medicine, Akira Kono was sent to Singapore in 1919 as part of the Japanese Embassy’s medical staff. It was there he first encountered Singaporean-style coffee, whose taste he didn’t much like. This motivated him to try a coffee-brewing apparatus developed by a British engineer in the mid-19th century based on syphoning principles. It was essentially a ‘vacuum coffee maker’ made of two laboratory flasks connected with a glass tube. Totally enchanted by the design, he modified it to make it more practical by using some flasks and tubes intended for medical purposes. After the great Tokyo earthquake in 1923, he returned to Japan and became a doctor, opening his own clinic in Tokyo’s Ueno district. Still, he continued working to develop a better syphon-style coffee maker. Finally, in 1926, the first Kono-style syphon coffee maker was born out of two flasks that connected vertically. “In those days, heat-resistant glass

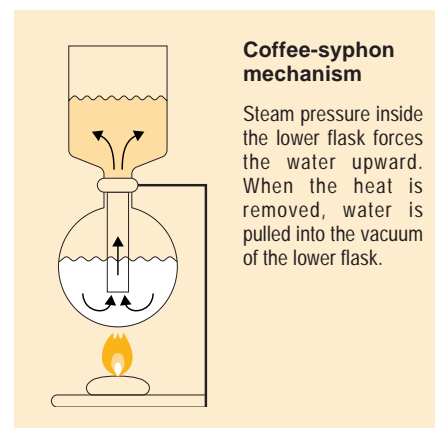
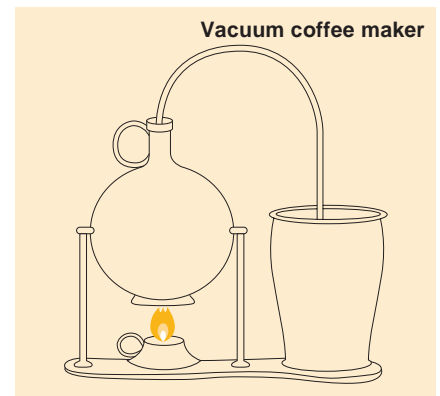
was not available, so if you used boiling water the glass could easily break. For this reason, my grandfather heated the water using an alcohol burner, which is not so hot. The technology of his day wasn’t quite ready for his innovative design.”

During World War II, metals were in short supply, which forced him to use ceramic for making syphon stands as he continued refining his design. It wasn’t until the late 1960s, after 40 years of development, that the coffee syphon experienced a tremendous boom in popularity in Japan.

In any syphon, water rises due to air pressure and falls due to its weight. In a coffee syphon, steam pressure forces the water up a tube into an upper flask where it mixes with the coffee. After it has brewed for a time, the heat is turned off creating a vacuum in the lower flask that pulls hot coffee back into it after passing through a filter.

Examples of the syphon principle can be found in our daily lives in everything from flushing a toilet to turning on a faucet and the recently widely discussed techniques for syphoning up deep sea water. Syphon techniques for controlling the supply of water are also used by the construction industry.

Compared to dripping coffee through paper or cloth, the coffee syphon



might appear complex at first glance. But according to Mr. Kono, syphoning is the best technique for making a good-tasting cup of coffee with ease. “Brewing time is just 40-60 seconds, and it’s easier to control the heat. The best water temperature for brewing coffee is said to be around 83°C. As water starts climbing the tube of a coffee syphon, its temperature is 93°C. But since the tube is cool, by the time it reaches the upper flask it has cooled about 10°C to the optimum brewing temperature of 83°C. I don’t know if my grandfather knew about this level of detail.”

Coffee brewed using this method is less bitter, and has a rounded, pleasing taste.

Beyond coffee brewing, there are many areas where the syphon principle is being used. What new tastes will this lead to in the future?

Special thanks for cooperation from Kono Syphon Co., Ltd.

<http://www.tatsujin.co.jp/kcs/index.html>

