



As dine-in was allowed again in Shanghai in late June, the city's coffee aroma is returning too. — Dong Jun

Cafés in Shanghai innovate to survive, just like it's always been



Café chain Manner Coffee collaborates with beauty brand Helena Rubinstein to launch a special drink named "matcha ice cream latte" to celebrate youth. — Chen Cheng

Yao Minji

Fancy a revenge coffee?

It was end of June when dine-in was allowed again in Shanghai, and quite a few friends invited me for a long-awaited sit-in at a café.

A friend brought my favorite scallion pancake on our first café-return. Somehow, that strange blend of Shanghai's summer breeze, street food and coffee aroma was so reassuring — my city was back!

Now a month later, many small shops, including coffee houses, are still struggling to get back on their feet. Out of desperation or hope, they have become more innovative in branding and products. Some chains are crossing the boundaries to launch products with fashion brands.

Small shops are creating all kinds of special drinks including "green code" coffee.

Some are making trending videos while others are selling everything in a café.

You'd be surprised at what the city's more than 7,000 coffee shops are selling and doing now.

That resilience and pragmatic creativity remind me of the long and intriguing history of coffee in Shanghai — one of an imported product packed with mix-and-match, innovation and a strength to bounce back whenever possible.

The very beginning of the city's coffee aroma was a mismatch when it was sold as a "cough potion" in a pharmacy in mid-19th century Shanghai. Gradually,

the "cough potion" became a popular drink along with the opening of Western-style restaurants, nightclubs and later cafés.

According to local archives, there were 186 cafés in Shanghai by October 1946, and another 111 Western-style restaurants that offered coffee.

When you dig deeper into the old photos and archives, you start to wonder about the definition of café — all the business it covered under that single roof.

The city was full of adventurers who are little-known today and only exist in archives and memoirs. One such figure was Louis Ladow, described as one of the most influential nighttime tycoons in the city in the 1920s and 1930s in some Shanghaileander's memoirs.