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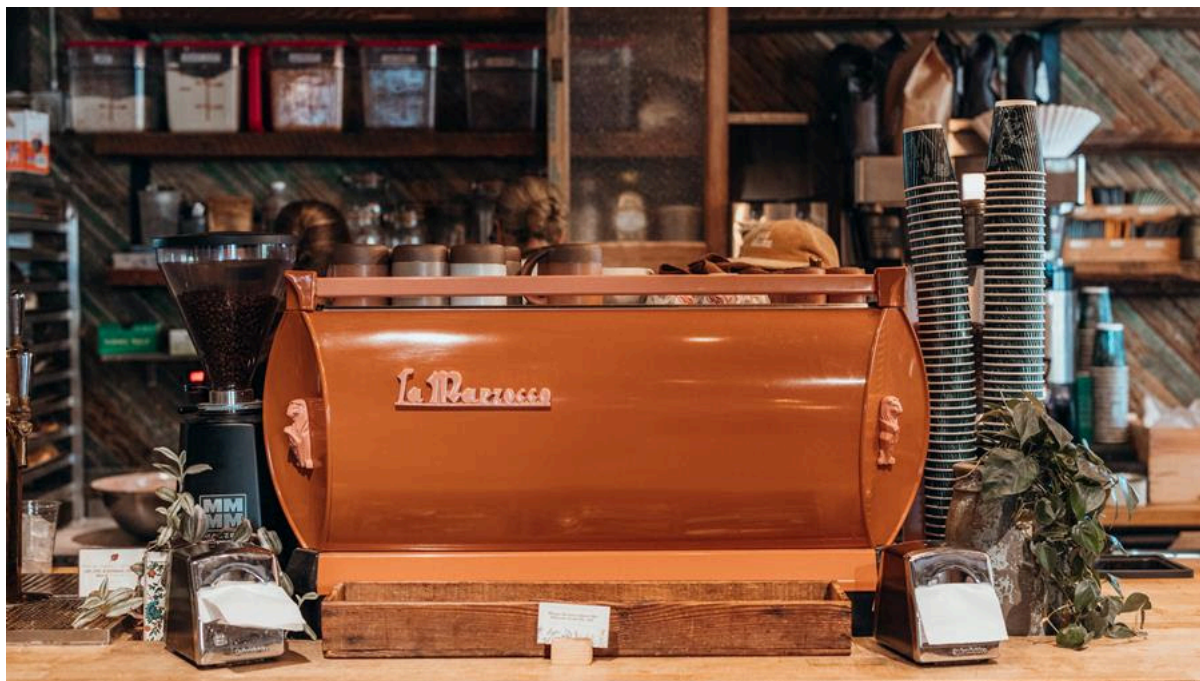
It's not the heat. It's the humidity.

The Food Section <raskin@thefoodsection.com>

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The espresso machine at Harken Café/ Provided photo by Emily Semans

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BY TIARE-LEIANA SOLIS-RIDGELL

Even as heat surges across the country, Southerners remain among the nation's top consumers of air conditioning. In Louisiana, for example, Energy Information Administration [data](#) shows household air-conditioning consumption is 15.4 MMBtus, or about double the U.S. average.

It's understandable. In a state where both heat and humidity have [climbed](#) steadily since the 1970s, residents feel like they're wilting on sweltering days that give way to [still muggy](#) nights. When heat indices cross the triple-digit mark, people coping with the breathing problems, cardiac stress, and anxiety [linked](#) to humidity are bound to seek out cooler air.

Humidity also has a curious way of affecting your morning cup of Joe. Coffee beans are hygroscopic, meaning they absorb water, so their journey from tree to mug must be undertaken in perfect conditions—particularly if one stopover is an espresso machine. Espresso grinds, while more tightly packed than the grinds used for drip coffee, aren't so tightly packed that the moisture can't pass through.



Brewing espresso/ Photo by [Nathan Dumlao](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Beans, ground and otherwise/ Photo by [Zarak Khan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

For that reason, baristas across the South have historically freaked out about humidity.

“It used to be that if it was super humid outside, all of the baristas thought, ‘That is going to drastically affect how I’m dialing in my espresso inside’,” Will Shurtz, co-owner of

Greenville, South Carolina-based Methodical Coffee, said.

But while increased humidity has placed an intense burden on farm laborers, construction crew members, and other Southerners who work outdoors, experts such as Shurtz say longstanding concerns about its effect on coffee quality are overblown. Still, in deference to the fast-changing climate, they're exerting extra caution over their brewing setups.



It's hot/ Photo by [Immo Wegmann](#) on [Unsplash](#)

"You could say that right after roasting, the roasted bean moisture level would be pretty close to 0% but immediately as the bean cools, it starts to take on moisture from the air," said Julie K. Northcutt, professor of food safety at Clemson University.

According to Northcutt, if roasted coffee is exposed to humidity, absorbed moisture can make the bean less brittle, increasing the chance of over-extracting espresso. Over-extracted espresso tends to be bitter, while under-extracted espresso has sour notes.

For instance, Harken Cafe in Charleston—which opened in 2016, a year after Methodical—was one of Methodical's earliest wholesale clients. Shurtz was fully cognizant of the threat posed by Lowcountry humidity when he developed Harken's daily espresso recipe. To achieve the desired sweetness and mouthfeel, he adjusted the water-to-coffee ratio and grind size, ensuring balanced extraction from the beans.



*Espresso at Harken Café/ Provided
photo by Emily Semans*



*Breakfast spread at Harken Café/
Provided photo by Emily Semans*



*Interior of Harken Café/ Provided
photo by Emily Semans*

Since then, it's been up to Harken to honor the recipe, tweaking specs when necessary to maintain flavor.

"Any coffee shop that exists dials in. It's just a basic thing that you do," Harken's co-owner Greer Gilchrist said of the parameters a barista heeds when grinding and brewing espresso.

Gilchrist said managing beans is much like helping human beings through a heat wave: Be prepared, monitor changes, and use the simple-but-effective method of "good old fashioned air conditioning."

Tiare-Leiana Solis-Ridgell is a food and travel writer from Mililani, Hawaii. She started her career in Charleston.

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