How Nespresso's coffee revolution got ground down

-By Rushial Malhotra

In 1975, a young engineer named Eric Favre took a trip to Rome that would change the history of coffee. Favre had recently started working at Nestlé's headquarters in Vevey, Switzerland, and one of his first projects was to develop a machine that would combine the convenience of domestic coffee with the quality of an Italian espresso bar, where customers paid more for a product made by an expert using large, expensive equipment.

Successful products can look inevitable in hindsight, but the gap in the market wasn't obvious. At the time, two kinds of coffee were drunk at home. There was roast and ground, which was tasty but laborious, whether prepared in a cafetière, stove-top or filter machine. Or there was soluble instant coffee, which was quick and easy but had an unsubtle flavour. To be tempting at a higher price, Favre's new machine had to offer high quality coffee with the speed and ease of instant.

Wandering through the centre of Rome, Favre noticed a long queue snaking from a coffee bar near the Pantheon. Plenty of other cafes nearby used the same machines. What was it about this place, Favre wondered, that made it so special? Inside, the barista explained that other operators pumped the piston just once before releasing the coffee. But at Sant'Eustachio Il Caffè, the baristas pumped repeatedly. This meant they forced more water and air into the ground beans, which meant greater oxidisation, which drew out more flavour from the beans and produced more of a crema – the layer of foam formed on top of a good espresso.

In the history of at-home premium coffee, this is perhaps the closest anyone has ever come to a eureka moment. Favre returned to Switzerland and, along with a small team, set about designing a machine that could replicate this procedure. The idea of a portioned coffee system had been around since the 50s, but no one had seriously pursued it. Favre's aim was to build a world in which espresso was available at home. Customers would own a machine, into which they would place a sealed pod filled with ground coffee. The pod would keep the coffee fresh. (Although roast coffee can stay fresh for weeks, ground coffee loses its freshness after about half an hour.) The capsule design would also ensure greater aeration, mimicking the repeat oxidisations at the Sant'Eustachio. After the pod was inserted, a needle-like spout would pierce one end. Hot water would be pumped through this needle at high pressure. As the capsule became pressurised with water, the foil would be forced against a spiked plate, bursting it inwards, and out through the spout would run an espresso.

The following year, 1976, Nestlé filed its first patent for a single-serve coffee system. "Favre is one of those people who pop up in history and do great things," Marco Restelli, Nespresso's head of product and development, told me at Nespresso's offices in Lausanne. "OK, it's not Einstein, but what he achieved within kitchen appliances will stay with us for a long time."

Today, some 14bn Nespresso capsules are sold every year, both online and from 810 brightly lit boutiques in 84 countries. More than 400 Nespressos are drunk every second. Hundreds of rivals and imitators have emerged, some making capsules for Nespresso machines, others pushing competitor systems. The firm employs more than 13,000 people and the Nespresso magazine, which the company has referred to as a "bi annual pleasure guide", has a circulation of more than 2m. In 2013, the most recent year it released figures, Nespresso's revenues totalled $10.8bn. Its success has provided its public face, the actor George Clooney, with the means to maintain a private satellite over Sudan.

For a certain kind of business traveller, the sight of a little Nespresso pod in a drawer by the minibar has become as familiar as a Gideon Bible. Buying a machine grants you membership of the Nespresso Club, literally, and also membership of the Nespresso club, metaphorically – a global fellowship of people who care enough about their morning brew to spend 40 or 50p on 5 grams of it, but not enough to spend more

than 30 seconds preparing it. In their homes, the distinctive hum, whirr and clunk of a machine in action has taken its place alongside the churn of a dishwasher. “If Nespresso had been a startup from Silicon Valley, everyone
would be hailing them,” says Rory Sutherland, the vice-chair of the advertising agency Ogilvy, who owns three Nespresso machines. “They’re like a Swiss Apple.”

A Nespresso store in Switzerland. Photograph: Laurent Gilliéron/EPA

Thirty years after its first successes, Nespresso has scale, experience and buying power that no other premium coffee company can match. But increasingly it finds itself threatened from below by its rivals’ cheaper capsules, and from above by fussier coffee enthusiasts. The more scrutiny Nespresso has attracted, the tighter it has drawn the curtains. It no longer releases figures about its sales or revenues, with its results buried in the overall Nestlé reports. James Hoffman, the author of the World Atlas of Coffee, describes Nespresso as “a black box of a company”.

Nespresso also faces mounting criticism over the environmental impact of its pods. (It does not release any figures for how many of its aluminium capsules end up dumped in landfill, rather than recycled.) Talk to people in the industry, and you get the sense that Nespresso’s golden age has passed. “In the major markets, Nespresso’s getting close to saturation point, and there’s lots of competition,” says Jean-Paul Gaillard, Nespresso’s former CEO. “The good years are over.”

Nespresso triumphed by selling itself as a sophisticated component of an elite, globalised lifestyle. Wherever you were in the world, you could be a Nespresso person, just as you could wear Nike trainers or use American Express. Now, as that lifestyle looks increasingly bankrupt, it is learning to be just another coffee company. Nespresso helped change the coffee world, but it seems as if the world has moved on. Nespresso argues its coffee has never been better, but the truth is that Nespresso has never really been about the coffee.

At Nestlé headquarters in Vevey, there is a small museum dedicated to the history of Nespresso. Looking at the early prototypes on display – elaborate Rube Goldberg-type machines with outsize tanks and pumps and tubes – it is easy to see why it took 10 years after the first patent was filed for the product to come to market.

As a private company, Nestlé was able to fund its pet project without justifying the cost to the stock market. Within the company, though, there were doubters. Colleagues feared that if Favre's invention succeeded it would cannibalise the company's existing coffee businesses, especially the flagship Nescafé instant brand. At the time, Nestlé saw itself as a mass market company that sold cheap, reliable products: chocolate and baby food and cereal. This was something different, whatever it was.

When Nespresso was finally launched in 1986, it seemed like the sceptics had been right all along. The first models were designed to resemble traditional espresso machines, bigger and clunkier than the sleek designs available today, and only four types of capsule were available, offering various strengths of coffee. Pitched to businesses in Switzerland and Japan, for offices without enough space for a full-size coffee machine, Nespresso failed to find many takers. In 1988, in a bid to rescue the product, Nestlé brought in Gaillard, a tobacco man who had created the clothing brand Marlboro Classics when he worked at Philip Morris. Gaillard would work alongside Favre, but his brief was clear: if he couldn't turn the ship around, it would be sunk. "At the original launch the product was wrong, the positioning was wrong and the targeting was wrong," Gaillard told me. "It had cost a lot of money and brought nothing."

Under Gaillard, Nespresso would be transformed from an office coffee company into a luxury brand, the look and feel of which would be as much a part of the product as the beans themselves. "I wanted to create the Chanel of coffee, and decided to keep it chic and bobo," he said in a 2010 interview. The idea was to keep it to "the level of people who have a doorman". He told me he took inspiration from the wine industry. "The coffee was good and easy to make, but how do you spread the luxury feel?"

Where Favre and his team had focused on technical questions – not least how to miniaturise a system that usually took up several feet of bar space and required a skilled operator – Gaillard worried about everything else. He cut the price of the machines and licensed them to third parties. The first home machines had been made with one firm, Turmix. Later, you could buy a Krupps or Alessi Nespresso machine. These brand associations gave Nespresso familiarity in local markets, and encouraged fancy shops such as Harrods to stock them. Gaillard also overhauled the capsules, reducing the aluminium content and putting up the price by 50%. Most importantly, he began marketing Nespresso to individual consumers, rather than to businesses, through the new Club Nespresso. It was no longer just a better coffee for your office – it was a way of life.

A Nespresso coffee bar and shop in Montreal. Photograph: Alamy

When you ordered capsules, you joined the "Club", which also meant handing over your contact information. Over time, Nespresso gained a huge database of customers it could market to, as well as a way of recording consumer preferences and buying habits. For customers, the club created the sense that you were part of a sophisticated worldwide cabal of corporate espresso lovers. When I first encountered Nespresso, as a student, around 2006, I remember feeling like I was finally part of the global elite everyone kept complaining about. "What Nespresso have done is create a lot of benign bullshit around coffee," said Rory Sutherland. "But people enjoy the bullshit."

At the University of Oxford, Prof Charles Spence, head of the Crossmodal Research Lab, has studied how much your experience of coffee is shaped by the way it is presented. In Nespresso adverts, he observed, coffee is almost always displayed in a transparent glass, with a crown of light crema on top of the drink. "It starts to look almost like a pint of Guinness," Spence said. "Coffee doesn't come with the visual variation you get in tea or wine – it's all pretty much the same colour, so perhaps you have to show it with the crema." (The crema is key to the mythology of espresso. Legend has it that the Italian company Gaggia coined the term in the 30s, rebranding something customers had previously thought of as "scum" on the top of their drink as "caffe creme", a coffee so fine it made its own froth.)

For the people who sell it, the way coffee looks has long been as important as how it tastes. Until the late 19th century, beans were prized for their size, colour and symmetry. Nespresso applied a similar approach to its capsules: they started rather plain, in greys and golds, but evolved into a full spectrum. Red means decaffeinated, with darker purples and greys for the stronger, more intense flavours. "You are trying to give people visual clues about the origins of the product," said Spence. "People prefer the taste of things when they think they have made a choice about it." The Nespresso system made every customer feel like a connoisseur: you had to make a choice every time you put a capsule in the machine, even if it was just between black or purple.

After Gaillard's reforms, Nespresso finally took off, but it is Favre who tends to take the plaudits as the creator. The story of the tinkerer playing with pipes and valves in his workshop is more appealing than the smooth corporate rebranding exercise. Gaillard is only too glad to correct the record. "Those who really know the story, know it was me," he said. "Favre was a technician. He couldn't run the business." In 1990, after two years of struggle and personality clashes between the two men, Favre resigned, the result of what he described as a "coup d'etat". It doesn't take much to reopen the old wounds. "Gaillard is *un diable*," Favre told me. In his version of the story, Gaillard was a brash operator who made his position unbearable.

In 1997, Gaillard left Nespresso to run Nestlé's ice-cream business in the US. He subsequently left the company after falling out with the then CEO, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe. The animosity between Gaillard and Nestlé lingers. "My name is forbidden at Nestlé," Gaillard said, noting that there is no mention of him anywhere on the company website. He described the Favre-centric Nespresso origin story as, at best, a simplification, which omits the work of the many other designers involved. He also claimed that the original idea for Nespresso came not from within Nestlé but from a research organisation, the Battelle Institute, which Gaillard said sold the idea to Nestlé in 1973. (Nespresso denied the claims. When asked to clarify Favre and Gaillard's involvement, it replied with a generic history that mentioned no individuals.)

One crucial factor behind Nespresso's rise, unmentioned by Gaillard, was timing. In 1998, Starbucks arrived in the UK, and elsewhere in Europe from 2001. (Although not in Italy, which somehow held out until 2018.) Previously it had been difficult to get a decent coffee anywhere outside Italy. At Starbucks, you could enjoy Italian-style coffee, which is to say freshly made and with frothy milk, marketed with Italian-style language. According to the historian of consumption, Jonathan Morris, Nespresso capitalised on these new tastes: "When customers started to ask how they could have [Starbucks-style coffee] at home, Nespresso was the best-placed product to take advantage of that." Between its Fortissio and Vivalto pods, it had the cod-Italian ready to go, too.

The first Nespresso e-commerce site opened in 1998, and the first boutique opened in 2000. The following year, China's admission to the World Trade Organization enabled the manufacture of much cheaper machines. Even before George Clooney came along, the pot was bubbling nicely.

In Clooney's first ad for Nespresso, which aired in 2006, he wanders into a Nespresso boutique and starts making himself a cup of coffee. Wearing a black polo neck and blazer, he eavesdrops as a couple of winsome women exchange adjectives: "Dark, very intense, balanced, delicate and smooth. Rich, very rich." Clooney: "You're talking about the Nespresso, right?" They look at him. "What else," he says. French newspapers still sometimes refer to him as "Mr What Else?".

Clooney's public image – sophisticated, cosmopolitan, expensive – fitted Nespresso's desired image. "Mr Clooney embodies elegance," Anna Lundstrom, the company's chief brand officer, told me. "He cares about certain causes, so you know he's not going to endorse something he doesn't care about or believe in. But there's a humour to him, too."

Clooney has reportedly made more than $40m from his Nespresso work. He has said he spends most of it on the satellite he uses to monitor human rights abuses. "I think it would be hard to endorse any product for an extended period of time if you're not proud of your association," he told me via email. "It's been easy because I love the product. I drink it every day." Is it true that there are countries where he is better known for the ads than his acting? "Probably. I know there are countries where I'm more famous for being Amal Clooney's husband," he said Clooneyishly.

Pretty much everyone agrees that bringing Clooney on board was a masterstroke – except Gaillard. "It was a major mistake," he told me. "When you select one person to do your branding, you put two stars on the screen – the product and the person. Thanks to Nespresso's budget, Clooney became better known in Europe: he vampirised the brand."

The years that followed Clooney's first ad were Nespresso's happiest. In 2006, its revenues passed £500m. By 2010 they had reached 3bn Swiss francs (£2.5bn), and the capsule market was growing five times faster than the overall coffee market. In Switzerland, Nespresso took business from roast and ground; in China, from tea; in Britain, from instant. Nespresso reigned supreme over an entire domain of coffee that it had effectively created from scratch.

George Clooney in a Nespresso advert

As Nespresso kept growing, its pursuit of global homogeneity rubbed up against idiosyncratic national or regional coffee cultures. “If you are somewhere it is hot all the time, and you’ve just had a spicy meal, you don’t want a coffee that lasts very long, so you have a shot,” said Karsten Ranitzsch, Nespresso’s head of coffee, as we stood beneath a row of enormous silos in a state-of-the-art production centre in the Swiss municipality of Romont. “But in Scandinavia it has another function: to warm you up.” The company’s market research suggests that sometimes consumers do not know what they actually want. Culturally, Germans like to believe they like strong coffees, but if you give them a blind taste test, they prefer milder drinks, and often buy the coffee that isn’t the one they prefer.

Nespresso’s factories are gleaming temples to globalisation. Beans are shipped “green” from all over the world to the facilities in Romont, Orbe and Avenches. The beans are roasted, ground and put into capsules, between 5 and 6 grams of coffee and 1 gram of aluminium per capsule. On its long journey to the back of your throat, Nespresso coffee is checked for quality more than 40 times, using colour spectrometers and a battery of tasters in white coats. In some cases, there is DNA analysis. Ranitzsch told me that many of the tasters are trained in France, a nation where “palate” is taken seriously as a qualification. After the capsules have been packaged, they are sorted by robots and sent by train to Antwerp. From there, they are shippedto countries all over the world.

One major market has largely held out against Nespresso’s global conquest: the US. Partly the company was too slow, beaten by Keurig’s K-Cup. Where Nespresso aimed high, with sleek aluminium pods that emphasised quality, K-Cup’s plastic pods, many of which until recently were non-recyclable, emphasise convenience. The Nespresso system also sat uneasily in a coffee culture that prefers to drink coffee in enormous cups, ideally while driving. “Americans are simply not looking for an espresso first thing in the morning,” said Jim Watson, a senior beverages analyst at Rabobank in New York. “One of the biggest issues Keurig and Nespresso face is not making enough ounces. This is the land of the Starbucks venti. People are used to getting a 16oz or even a 20oz coffee.”

In a bid to crack the US, Nespresso introduced a whole new range of machines – the Vertuo system, capable of delivering much larger portions. In 2015, it finally signed up Clooney to a North American deal; until then he had only been the face of the firm in the rest of the world. Jean-Marc Duvoisin, who was CEO until the end of last year, told me that brand awareness went up by a multiple of "five or six" when Clooney arrived. But still, to this day, in the US Nespresso exists in the long, dark shadow of the K-Cup.

Although Nespresso's rise can be told in part as a triumph of branding, it also depended on a smart approach to patenting and design. One of Gaillard's innovations was to rebalance the business towards making revenue from the capsules rather than the machines. Just as Gillette have traditionally made most of their money by selling the replacement razor blades rather than the first handle, so Nespresso's entry-level machines were sold at lower prices, in the knowledge that customers would have to keep buying the pods, because only Nespresso pods worked in Nespresso machines.

For years, that model underpinned Nespresso's global growth. But eventually, would-be competitors spotted an opportunity to exploit the niche that Nespresso had created. Nestlé had ploughed a decade of investment into a system that got people to pay five times more for coffee at home than for traditional roast and ground: why not try to piggyback on that? In 2008, Gaillard launched the Ethical Coffee Company, which sold biodegradable capsules for Nespresso machines. In 2010, the American firm Sara Lee started to sell capsules that worked in Nespresso machines.

Nespresso furiously litigated against its rivals, arguing that its patent systems were being infringed. Things came to a head in 2012, when a key batch of Nespresso patents from 1992 were set to expire. That year, Nespresso lost its patent battles in Germany and England, and settled other outstanding cases around Europe. Overnight, the company had to accept it could no longer stop third-party capsules being sold for its machines. Talk to senior executives involved at the time, and it's clear the rulings were traumatic for the company.

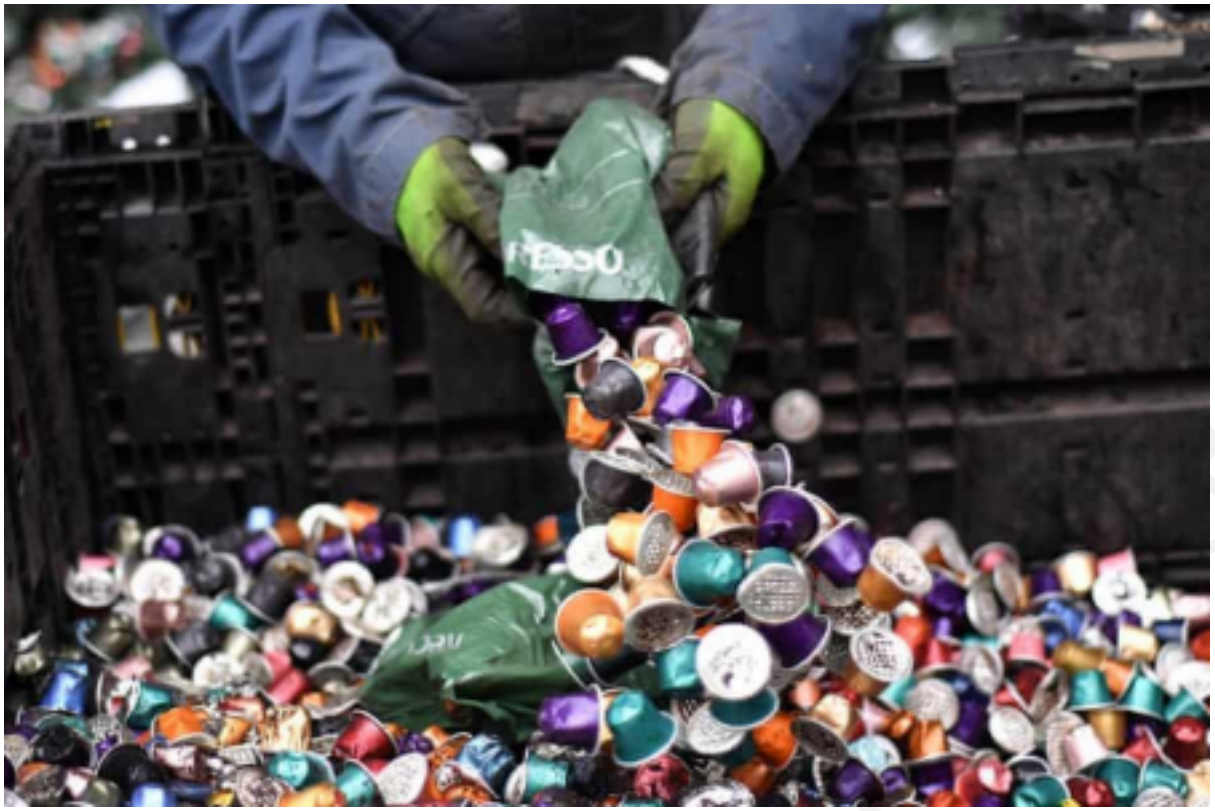
Jean-Paul Gaillard, former head of Nespresso and later founder of its rival Ethical Coffee Company, in 2010. Photograph: Philippe Desmazes/AFP/Getty Images

The court cases also made awkward PR for a company keen to promote its ethical sourcing. To many, it seemed that the Nestlé Goliath had gone after smaller, pluckier, seemingly more ethical Davids and been slain. It didn't help that in many consumers' eyes, Nestlé was still tainted by the formula milk scandal of the 70s. A report published in 1974, titled The Baby Killer, showed how Nestlé aggressively promoted formula milk over breastfeeding in poor countries, where clean water was hard to come by. Some sales reps even wore nurses' uniforms to gain an aura of credibility. The report led to a worldwide boycott and reform of its sales practices. Even today, Nespresso employees I spoke to said the memory of the scandal hampers its messaging around coffee. More recently, the company's reputation was further damaged when the Channel 4 documentary series Dispatches found children under 13 working 40-hour weeks on farms that supplied coffee to Nespresso and Starbucks. (Nespresso launched an internal investigation after the programme aired. "Protecting children from exploitation and ensuring they are able to learn is of paramount importance to us, and that is why we have zero tolerance for child labour," a spokesman told me.)

Jean-Marc Duvoisin became CEO in 2013, and was charged with taking Nespresso to a new era, leaving the patent disputes behind. From a closed, Apple-type system – Nespresso products for Nespresso machines – the company had to move to a more open, Android-type model. "There are going to be rival capsules," Duvoisin told me. "We need to leverage our strengths: knowing our customers, and knowing our farmers." Having worked for 40 years to be the only coffee-pod system in town, the company had to pivot to arguing that its capsules – made from strong, light aluminium, and filled with high-quality, responsibly farmed coffee – were the best on the market. Eight years on from Nespresso's *annus horribilis*, its biggest problem is the aluminium itself.

Every generation has its own anxieties around coffee. In the 16th century, the governor of Mecca feared it would encourage his citizens to overthrow him. At the dawn of the 17th century, Pope Clement VIII declared it to be "the devil's drink". Some decades later, in London, women petitioned against coffee houses, claiming it made their husbands impotent. These days we are less worried about what coffee does to us, especially with widely available decaffeinated options, and more worried about what coffee does to the world.
In the past decade, consumers have grown increasingly concerned about the sheer amount of waste caused by coffee pods. Halo, a firm which makes compostable pods, estimates that of the 39,000 pods made every minute, 29,000 will end up in landfill. In 2016, the city of Hamburg introduced a ban on buying coffee pods with council money, as part of a crackdown on "polluting products". (It did not stop the Nespresso boutique in the city centre from doing a brisk trade.)

Nespresso uses aluminium because it is light, strong and durable, making it the best material for a sealed container that must be flown around the world and then subjected to extreme heat and pressure on someone's kitchen counter. Only a tiny amount of coffee is used in each pod, so less coffee is wasted than in a cafetière, or with other methods, in which many grams can be used per cup. And the pods are, in theory, 100% recyclable.
But because they contain plastic as well as aluminium, they can't just be dropped in a regular recycling bin. Instead, used capsules must be dropped off at Nespresso boutiques or some convenience stores; in some countries, Nespresso offers a service that collects them from customers' homes.



Nespresso pods being recycled in Cheshire in 2017. Photograph: Anthony Devlin/PA

Unlike plastic, used by many of Nespresso's rivals, aluminium is 100% recyclable, but there is a big difference between offering recycling facilities and getting consumers to use them. Nespresso says its global recycling rate is 30%, and that 91% of its users have access to one of its 100,000 collection points around the world. But some experts have suggested that just 5% of Nespresso pods are recycled. Even if Nespresso's figure is accurate, with a conservative estimate of 14bn capsules being sold each year, and 0.9 grams of aluminium per capsule, that means 12,600 tonnes of Nespresso aluminium end up in landfill annually, enough for 60 Statues of Liberty.

"The business model of the future is not in grand statements about what companies will do," says Tima Bansal, a professor at Ivey Business school in Canada who specialises in sustainability. "It's about waste measurement and transparency. If someone measured the garbage I put out on the lawn, I'd behave differently." Bansal was mystified as to why Nespresso didn't provide more detailed public data, such as regional breakdowns, about how its capsules are recycled. "With their competitive advantage, they could be a model of sustainability, leading the circular economy," she said. "But once you lose your way, the competition makes it really scary."

On top of the landfill problem, there are the environmental costs of producing aluminium in the first place. Mining a tonne of aluminium can produce about 10-12 tonnes of waste, including 2-3 tonnes of toxic alkaline red mud. In an attempt to go slightly more green, Nespresso is now working with the commodities giant Rio Tinto to use only "sustainable aluminium". You might remember Rio Tinto from such edifying corporate stories as "accepting bribes in China", "corruption allegations in Guinea" and "the Norwegian government concluding that Tinto were 'directly involved' in 'severe environmental damage' through a mine in Indonesia".
If a tie-in between an Anglo-Australian mining conglomerate with a history of scandals and a secretive Nestlé owned coffee company doesn't calm the doubters, what will?

Sustainability in coffee is complex. Lots of the carbon cost is in transport, so by some measures, the most efficient use of beans is instant coffee, where only a small amount of coffee is used per cup. But as that coffee tends to come from large farms growing cheaper beans, it can be a worse deal for farmers, and

encourage types of farming that have a bigger impact on the environment. One solution could be reusable pods, where fresh coffee can be loaded into a Nespresso-friendly capsule, but at a significant cost to convenience. Defenders of pods say that as well as using a smaller volume of coffee, they use less energy, as the machine only heats the small amount of water needed for each serving. But until Nespresso pods can be included in household recycling, the figures on reuse are unlikely to improve. More eco-friendly competitors will continue to eat into Nespresso's market share.

As Nespresso has grown, it has come up against an awkward truth: the more popular a brand is, the harder it is to maintain a luxury image. "Our competitor is not other coffee companies," claimed Duvoisin. "When you go into our boutique, you are comparing us to Dior or Louis Vuitton." That may have been true once, but its boutiques are now on every high street. At the Touchwood centre in Solihull, Nespresso is opposite an Ernest Jones and next to Pandora. On Cheapside, by St Paul's in London, the boutique faces a Clintons Cards.

Like other high-street businesses, Nespresso has been buffeted by months of coronavirus closure. In its late 00s incarnation, when most of its pods were sold by mailorder or on the internet, Nespresso would have been less affected by coronavirus. ("When I was there we had the highest percentage [profit] margin in Nestlé," Gaillard told me. "But Nespresso did a 'reverse-Amazon'. They had an Amazon and turned into a bricks and mortar business.")

Nearly half a century after it was conceived, Nespresso finds itself in an uncomfortable new world. Consumers who might have once craved its polished, urbane chic now look for dirty-fingered artisanal blends to use with their pour-overs and Aeropress machines. A Nespresso machine on the kitchen counter used to prove your membership of a convenience-loving global consumer coffee elite. Increasingly it suggests that you are not a serious coffee person, and that your attitude to the future of the planet is suspiciously relaxed.

In its heyday, Nespresso fit a story consumers were keen to tell themselves: that for a small premium, quality could be guaranteed, whether you were in Tokyo, Geneva or Los Angeles. Its range of capsules offered the sense of choice, but in reality it was just one option: Nespresso. These days there are more than 400 competitor capsules. Cheap plastic ones, refillable eco-ones, limited-edition batches from faraway places. Specialty coffee has infiltrated the general population to the extent that McDonald's ran a gently sarcastic TV campaign about the flat white. Nespresso once wooed coffee lovers with its ease of use, and instant coffee drinkers with better coffee. Now there are alternatives for every taste.

"In many ways, the Nespresso pod is the microwave meal of coffee," said James Hoffman. "Nespresso is expensive for what it is. It's fine in terms of its quality, but with a little bit of effort you could make something far better at home." But as Maxwell Colonna-Dashwood, who runs an independent coffee shop in Bath, told me, Nespresso was never meant to rival true specialty coffee. "They don't want it to taste like that. They want it to have mass appeal."

"I love small-batch, third-wave coffee, too," Ranitzsch said, admiring his silos. "The guys with tattoos and beards stirring their beans in Brooklyn. It is artisanal. But here we want consistency." After the tour of Nespresso's facilities, Ranitzsch and I sat in the "coffee campus". Sitting at a tasting table, we sniffed, slurped and spat out a variety of different brews. He suggested aromas of flowers, fruit, earth and caramel and grew
slightly wistful. "Coffee comes with history and memories," he said. "Growing up, you didn't like it, but you wanted to be like the adults. It has something to do with belonging."

Favre, too, sometimes turns poetic when he talks about coffee. He told me that his invention didn't make him rich, but that didn't bother him. "I don't mind about the money," he said. "I see Nespresso like a daughter who is always telling me: look at what you can do and look at what you did. I am very proud of her. She is mine, she is in my heart, she is always in my mind."

In the summer of 2020, buffeted by Covid-19, Nespresso trundles on. In a recent email, a spokesperson reported "mid single-digit growth," and the company has announced it will be expanding the Romont facility, but the mood is different. A new CEO, Guillaume Le Cunff, another long-term employee, who had previously worked on many of the company's sustainability initiatives, took over earlier this year. In late May, a new ad appeared on Nespresso's YouTube page. Over shots of farmers and waterfalls and thoughtful-looking agronomists, a female voice talks about ecosystems, farmers and recyclable aluminium. "Now, more than ever, doing the right thing matters," she says. "Those who know most about exceptional coffee, know exceptional coffee comes from care." George Clooney is nowhere to be seen.

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