

A Foreigner's Guide to Shanghai's Top Coffee Grabs

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I've been coming to Shanghai regularly for over 15 years now. The vibrancy, cleanliness and beautiful people keep me coming back. Like any destination city, it has its quirks that a foreigner must adjust to. App-driven ordering, limited cash transactions and of course the language thing. One of the challenges back in the day was my transition from daily coffee in the States to morning tea simply because there wasn't a coffee house to be found. I recall finding instant coffee at a Carrefour and thought I hit paydirt. Boy have things changed.



Like Secretariat at the Belmont, Shanghai is now the coffee capital of the world. Yes... Shanghai, with nearly 10,000 coffee shops and counting. 20% of all take out coffee in China is generated in Shanghai. The boom is not happening as much in other tier one cities like Beijing and Guangzhou either. From day one, the craze is obvious with Meituan delivery service drivers running everywhere, pants-on-fire style, with packed coffees in hand; often forcing shop workers to solely cater to take out orders. I sometimes felt like the exception when walking in and ordering a coffee at the counter. It was also commonplace to be forced to order on my app while standing right in front of the very same counter. I managed to get through it like a true local Shanghainese.

The Shanghai Java Plan

While my recent two-week trek would no doubt land a taste of true java heaven, I decided to focus on the popular chain shops. The goal; one per day. Ok, maybe two. I didn't want to force feed my indulgence either. One in the morning if my schedule allowed, which is a respectful way of saying no-go if my mother-in-law was making fresh soy milk that morning.

I could validate such a turn of event at 6am sharp when I heard the soymilk maker doing its continuous 'ERRRRRRRR', (pause)... 'ERRRRRRRRRR' for about 45 minutes straight. How dare I risk family relations. The exception being when my jet-lagged body, staring at the walls at 5am, forced me to check my We-chat app for the opening hours of my list of shops

to conquer. Even Mcee-D's has their variety of coffee and open 24 hours mind you. I refrained from such this trip but was open to trying some fast-food coffee if it fell into my lap.

If not for the digital lock on the front door audio-confirming (quite loudly in fact) in Mandarin that I had unlocked the front door, I think my sneaking out would have gone unnoticed. It did until the one time I set off the alarm. I feverishly pushed random buttons with Chinese radicals on them in between my bad New York style vulgarities until it stopped. I think the one that looked like a house with a TV antenna did the trick. I never asked and was never questioned. At least not in English. I'll leave it at that.

I tried 11 different chain shops over 14 days, many in the Jing'an district with some having a re-visit either to validate my findings, trying a different blend or simply because my buds were a bit coffeed-out and wanted to give each place a respectful shot. Similar to having a cracker between wine tastings, I found having a 'baozi', *xiao-long-bao* or a hot dumpling soup in between coffee treks cleaned the pallet albeit at the risk of a few extra kilos added to the waistline. During my last few visits, I realized that americano style coffee all tended to taste the same for me, so my planned default bullet was of the latte route.



So with respect to the great mom and pop solo shops all over Shanghai, here is my ranking of chain coffee shops in this great city. While 80% of the score was based on taste, I had to throw in a few small points for the overall vibe, friendliness, and cultural experience. While taste of course is king, it was difficult to not have a cute smiling face hand this foreigner his coffee and not somehow filter its tiny influence onto the list.

Let's get started!

Number 10: MStand. It doesn't get more bourgeois than having an opportunity to eat your coffee cup but that's the shtick with MStand. Too bad the coffee is over-rated and overpriced. The 'combo', which is an extremely small latte and a 'dirty', (with espresso) has a beautiful presentation but fails to make the good part of the list. Perhaps the expectation bar was too high, just like the price (the highest on the list by far). Needless to say, it lands last on my short list.



Number 9: Starbucks Reserve Roastery – Starbucks seems to have locations

everywhere. That’s what happens when one opens every 15 hours in China. During my walk in the Xujiahui area I passed five of them. Their Roastery’s are reserve locations with a special blend that you can only get at these premier locations. I even met CEO Howard Schultz one time during a grand opening at the West Nanjing Road location. It’s like a museum, production facility and high-end Starbucks with Budokan-like seating. It’s the place to be seen for sure. I’m not a big Starbucks fan back in the States and the taste is similar in SH. If you like Starbucks or need good wi-fi, this is the place for you. Just gonna pass on the coffee.



Number 8: Burger King – Coffee at Burger King? Towards the 2nd half of my trip I had a western food moment and they advertise their coffee as much as their whoppers, so why not? Average at best and wondered where their ‘King Coffee’ signature coffee went? It used to be a staple stop for me before Shanghai became the coffee capital of the world. Always a reminder to ask for sugar because the default is no sweetness whatsoever, even with a latte. Glad I tried it and I’ll now move on.



Number 7: K Coffee from KFC – Pretty standard fare with a cooked water feel to it until I let it settle down and then it got better with every sip. The homerun was their soymilk; better than most real soymilk places you can find. Using the KFC app for specials made it a great deal but will consider it average for a quick in and out try. Want to elevate the experience? Look for the xiao-long-bao combo. Small pillows of happiness ala

Anthony Bourdain and incredibly under-rated. OK, s-l-b at KFC? How dare me; and dare me twice because I went back later in the trip just for the combo.

Number 6: Wagas – ok, help me here. Waaag-us? Wag-us? Wag-iz? So I'm not sure how to pronounce it but Wagas made the list. In the States, we have a chain called Panera Bread which Wagas has a similar feel. A classic check the laptop and pay a premium for wi-fi kinda place. No complaints at all and their menu items looks scrumptious. Maybe not my go-to for coffee in the future but a solid brew without the wow factor.



Number 6a: Tim Hortons – This Jersey boy loves his Tim Hortons back in the States. There's more Hort locations in Shanghai now than in New York. Go figure. Sometimes in the U.S. I'll check the Chinese app for specials knowing I'm 7,000 miles away. Why you ask is a story for a different time but where in Shanghai can you get bagels with coffee? At the abbreviated *Tims* of course! While Tims has a youthful vibe and takes the #1 spot in the app-combo scrolling delish-o-meter, their coffee gets an honorable mention. I pondered the rating of my biased and beloved Hort many times during my trip. It deserves to be higher, but Tims is a victim of other great chains passing them rather than just having an average rating. Tims will always have a place in my heart here but worry it's getting lost in the pack.



Number 5: Q Café – I've noticed some of these tucked away in-between hair salons and fresh veggie stores near metro stops. I gave it a shot and was pleasantly surprised. I try not to commingle the experience and friendliness with my coffee rating but it's difficult not to at the Q. Friendly smiles and finger-pointing simplicity to a foreigner like me will get you everywhere and letting me know in mandarin that I'm better off with a buy-one-get-one without having to use the app makes it even better.

Perfect for on-the-go. Just know that not every location has coffee. Some just have hot soymilk. A little 7-Eleven wannabe but its great taste made me want some more.

Number 4: Luckin' Coffee – This was the trip where I officially became a Luckin' fan. The vanilla and brown sugar latte was exceptional. I hear a lot about Luckin' and their cult following. I can see why. Aside from the small breakfast muffin items that I can do without, Luckin' is a rockin'. A poor man's Starbucks if you will but it has my support. Now if I can only get their over-the-top confusing laowai-unfriendly WeChat app to work properly. Thanks to their patient staff, it all worked out and so happy it did.



Number 3: Manner coffee - In a manner of speaking, excellent. Kinda like the quiet boy genius in the back of the classroom. Manner started with one back-alley store in Shanghai and quickly grew to a \$1billion company. It's difficult to walk around town and not bump into a Manner. I had a simple latte that came with a smile, friendly service and a barista's love heart shape topping. Soft and smooth. If you want a bold jolt to wake you up, a Manner latte is not for you. It's comfort food in the form of coffee. Premium value and atmosphere at a value price. Enough for me wanting to try more, of which I did.



Number 2: Family Mart – Family Mart? #2? Seriously? Yes. Phenomenal standard for a mini mart. I tried the regular latte and something with herbs in it. Incredible! You don't need any sweetener either. This sleeper has set the bar high. I know it's a little Bourdain-ish similar to his Lawson fetish, but I went back and back again. One of my aforementioned early morning Family Mart treks was the reason I risked mother-in-law soymilk-gate drama. The taste was well worthy of tampering with family relations and omg... did not disappoint!

Number 1: Lavazza – Ladies and gentlemen we have a winner; blowing away the competition endlessly. Lavazza nails it in every category; quality, selection, service, friendliness and atmosphere. It's has a little bit of fu-fu without being over the top. It's my sweet spot and although a bit higher in price range, it's worth every penny, or whatever they call a penny in Shanghai. I actually moaned a few times when sipping my coffee here. I'd consider moving my bed in there too but no need. Their velvet chairs will serve just fine. Lavazza taking the #1 spot was a no brainer and will think of her next time I'm bored in a meeting or stuck in traffic. Their Italian specialties never disappointed me. My goal in life is to have world peace and to try every item on the Lavazza menu; and it started with an Italian chocolate mountain specialty. Viva Italia in Shanghai!



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