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## Caramel + Latte ≠ Caramel Latte

A cup of latte is a pleasure, but a cup of *caramel* latte is a form of rapture for coffee-lovers who love sweetness as well. But my favorite drink is not just a latte with caramel syrup added: it is a virtual experience. The mixture of the sweet caramel aroma and rich milk flavor relaxes me so much that I feel like I am on holiday. But where should you go if, like me, you want to experience the ideal ten- or fifteen-minute get-away here in Seoul? In order to find out the answer to this question, I visited four famous coffee franchises—Starbucks, Pascucci’s, Holly’s Coffee and The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf—to sample some of the best-tasting caramel lattes this city has to offer.

Starbucks Coffee is the biggest coffee company in the world and famous for its roasting technique. This technique is what makes Starbucks coffee both unique and extremely addictive. When the roasted coffee beans meet with the steamed milk and caramel syrup, a blockbuster flavor is created. At its best, Starbucks caramel latte can taste like temptation itself: sweet yet not too extreme. Just before you think you can get hold of it enough to say, “That’s it!”, the taste has dissolved on your tongue. The pleasure of Starbucks caramel latte derives from the fact that you cannot imagine how the taste will be before you actually start to drink it. Alas, that is also the problem with

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Starbucks: the individual outlets often fail to make it properly. In other words, the taste of a caramel latte is different in each store. Some make it without enough sweetness; others, so that it is bitter to the taste. In a phrase, it's an unsatisfying, because unpredictable, experience.

If we were to consider the issue of presentation alone, the nicest caramel latte would be that served at Pascucci's. This Italian coffeehouse chain provides true latte art service. Pascucci's coffee is also good in that it does not have the bitter taste that is true of most Italian coffee. Pascucci's seems to have adapted their main coffee flavors to the Korean taste very well, without sacrificing its distinct aroma. However, their caramel latte lacks something, and the franchise appears not to have succeeded in creating a distinctive signature taste. Here, there is no sweet harmony of caramel and latte; instead, they live separate lives. What is more, this experience is followed by an unpleasant metallic aftertaste which prevented me at least from finishing off my drink.

Holly's Coffee is the most famous indigenous coffee store in Korea and well-known for the freshness of its coffee beans. The company makes sure that all of its coffee is used up within a month of being roasted. After the company took the decision to strengthen its policy of using only high-quality beans, many people suggested that the coffee flavor had improved also. Unfortunately, the policy appears not to have affected the particular flavor of their caramel latte. This drink can only be described as a kind of everyman's drink, tasting no more than average. In truth, the caramel latte lacks even the proper taste of both caramel and sweetness, and its vague aftertaste is not enough to impress itself on the imagination.

The last stop on my whirlwind tour of Seoul coffeehouses was The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf. The Coffee Bean is famous for the consistent sweetness of its drinks. Indeed, the best coffee in The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf is their caramel latte; it is, in fact, arguably the very best caramel latte in town. This franchise's caramel latte has a hypnotic flavor. In its perfect harmony of sweet extremity and latte mildness, it can truly be called a heavenly experience. The sensation of this drink starts at the tip of the tongue and ends only at the very opening of the throat. Perhaps for some, the fierce sweetness might be too strong, but for those who are used to sugar in their lattes, there is nothing like it.

Coffee lovers who drink caramel latte—particularly those who insist on drinking only caramel latte—love it mostly for its sweetness. These are the type of people who cannot truthfully say they could drink an americano or espresso without sugar. Whatever they order, these people expect some degree of sweetness: the right combination of latte and caramel or sometimes simply the stimulating flavor of the caramel alone. For these people, and I include myself in this number, the most worthwhile coffee experience in town is undoubtedly the caramel latte at The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.