Coffee, the New Wine

Forget the notion that coffee drinking is a vice — a bad habit that stunts your growth, stains your teeth, and rots your stomach. Coffee has undergone an image makeover.

What used to be a cup of joe — a black sludge sitting on the burner for hours and available in two forms, regular or decaf — is now as sophisticated as a fine wine, and with the health benefit claims to boot.

Just as wine has been consumed since biblical times, people have been drinking coffee for thousands of years, says Dr. Roseane Maria M. Santos, assistant professor of pharmaceutical sciences at South University. Ancient people, for some reason, selected this little fruit to roast and brew and drink.

"Human nature," she says, "is very, very wise."

Santos, who runs a research unit on coffee and health at South University, has been studying the drink's effects with Dr. Darcy R. Lima, a Brazilian physician involved in various clinical and epidemiological studies on coffee and health.

The two recently published An Unashamed Defense of Coffee: 101 Reasons to Drink Coffee Without Guilt. The book takes a look at those health benefits, as well as the social, physiological, and economic plusses of coffee.

Various studies, according to Santos and Lima, show coffee may prevent Alzheimer's, alcoholism, depression, and gout. And the September issue of Harvard Women's Health Watch notes coffee's benefits also may include a reduced risk of developing gallstones, colon cancer, liver damage, and Parkinson's disease.

Research out of Harvard has shown a lower risk for Type 2 diabetes among regular coffee drinkers. A 2004 study found that men who drank six cups of regular coffee per day saw their diabetes risk decrease by more than 50%; women by nearly 30%.

"Current research reveals that in moderation — a few cups a day — coffee is a safe beverage that may even offer some health benefits," according to a statement from Harvard Health Publications.

The message sounds similar to advice about drinking two glasses of wine a day for good health. And coffee drinkers are beginning to get the message, according to a 2008 study by the National Coffee Association. When asking consumers last year about the health benefits of drinking coffee, and whether the drink could be good for health, positive responses were up significantly, the study found, compared with 2005.

"Positive health messages are clear drivers of consumption," the study states.

There are still concerns about caffeine, a mild addictive stimulant. And, according to the Harvard report, "coffee does have modest cardiovascular effects such as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and occasional irregular heartbeat that should be considered."

Historically, research on coffee has focused solely on the effects of caffeine. But coffee is a complex beverage with many compounds in addition to caffeine. In many cases, the jury is still out on the health impact, according to Dr. Rob van Dam, assistant professor in the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.

"This is a pretty active area of research right now, and it's not at the stage where we would say, 'Start drinking coffee to increase your health even if you don't like it,' " van Dam writes in a Harvard publication. "But I think the evidence is good that for people in general — outside of a few populations, such as pregnant women, or people who have trouble controlling their blood pressure or blood sugar — coffee is one of the good, healthy beverage choices."
It’s these compounds in the coffee that Santos and Lima are studying. The compounds come both from the beans themselves and from the process by which they are prepared.

Coffee is one of the few natural compounds that, when roasted, gives birth “to other compounds that are even better for your health,” Santos says.

But roast the coffee too much or burn the coffee and you degrade the process.

Santos and Lima are looking for just the right mix of beans and just the right roasting time to maximize coffee’s health benefits.

The beans’ origins and roasting play a strong role in coffee’s taste, as well. And America has developed a coffee palate. “People are more sophisticated in a lot of ways about the food that they eat,” said Sandy Yusen, director of public relations for Green Mountain Coffee Roasters’ Specialty Coffee Business Unit. “Coffee is very much a part of that too.”

Coffee drinkers are increasingly aware that taste can be affected by where their coffee beans come from, the soil and climate they are grown in, and even the social conditions of the community, Yusen said.

And while there are two main species of coffee plants - Arabica and Robusta - the beans are grown in many countries including Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Hawaii, Kenya, Yemen, Vietnam and Costa Rica.

In her book, Santos writes, “Costa Rican coffee is prized for its high notes: bright citrus or berrylike flavors in the acidity - and in the best cups, they fade into chocolate or spicy flavors in the aftertaste.”

Not only do the descriptions sound straight from a Napa Valley tasting room, there is a formal process of tasting coffee called cupping. Cuppers follow a ritual using a special spoon to slurp and swirl trying to maximize the taste and smell the brew.

Even the classic taste complaint — “bitter” — is turned on its head these days.

“At low levels, bitterness helps tame the acidity and adds another favorable dimension to the brew,” writes Santos, the South University professor.

This focus on taste profiles can be seen in increased consumer interest in customized coffees. And for Green Mountain Coffee Roasters’, that has been a big driver of growth for the company’s Keurig brand, which manufactures single-cup coffee brewing systems.

“There’s such variety in the system that people can have a lot of choice,” Yusen says.

Santos hopes that the coffee industry continues to give consumers a greater choice and begins providing more detailed information on both the origin of the beans and the nutritional information on coffee labels. Revised labels could be a hybrid between the wine label certifying 100% Sonoma Valley product and the nutrition label with percentages of daily value.

In the meantime, much like wine, there are tons of coffee options out there right now.

“You just have to find a good one for you,” Santos said. “And why do you want to find a good one? Because coffee is good for your health.”