

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The aluminium-free coffee pod taking on Nespresso
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051791>

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The aluminium-free coffee pod taking on Nespresso

Migros, the largest retailer in Switzerland, brought out a packaging-free coffee pod in September 2022 – CoffeeB. The sudden arrival of this biodegradable product took the world by storm. But how is Nestlé, number one in the coffee market, reacting?

STÉPHANE HERZOG

To sample a CoffeeB, the new biodegradable pod from Migros subsidiary Delica, the first step is to go to a Migros electronic goods store in Geneva. At a sales stand, a saleswoman removes a brown ball from its cardboard packet. The machine created for this innovation – on sale for 169 Swiss francs – produces an espresso with no bitter taste. Not bad! The still-warm used coffee balls have dropped into the capsule collector. Pressing with your fingertip is enough to break through the plant membrane containing the coffee. The coffee grounds spill out into your hand. You start looking for a potted plant to hide the evidence.

A coffee ball out to conquer the world

This is the whole purpose of the product, sold in Switzerland and France, right under the nose of Nespresso, which has been flooding the planet with its aluminium pods since 1986. Migros claims that it offers the advantages of pod coffee “without the bitter aftertaste of waste pods”, thanks to a protective envelope made from plants and seaweed that means it needs no packaging. CoffeeB balls are manufactured in Birsfelden (BL), although the machines come from China. Migros has promised that the machines’ parts can be repaired or replaced.

Jann, 50, has also come to try out the product. The data manager learned about coffee balls when watching TV in Korea. He owns a Nespresso machine, but prefers another brand of pod. He has plenty to choose from – 200 firms around the world make their own pods. Thanks to CoffeeB, Migros is gaining a foothold in the massive Swiss coffee market.



No aluminium, no plastic, no waste: the CoffeeB coffee pod is entirely made from plants. The remnants can be composted.
Photo: Keystone

Nespresso, which prepares and roasts its coffee in Switzerland, generated 3.2 billion francs in revenue over the first six months of 2022. The giant also manufactures Starbucks pods, the sales of which represent 20 percent of the compatible pods sold worldwide.

“Environmental heresy”

“It is a shame that the world leader in coffee pods is not innovating and is continuing to use aluminium packaging, which is environmental heresy,” said Philippe Nicolet, former managing director of Ethical Coffee. This Swiss brand took on Nestlé with its own compatible pods, before abandoning its fight with the giant in 2017.

Nestlé sees things differently. “The carbon impact of a cup of coffee obtained from another entirely automated machine is 30 percent higher than from the Nespresso system,” replies Jessica Chakhsi, spokeswoman

of Nespresso Switzerland. By using the precise quantities of coffee, water and electricity necessary, she says, Nestlé keeps the wastage of these resources to a minimum. “What impacts the environmental footprint of a cup of coffee the most is the coffee manufacturing and final consumption processes,” according to the brand, which runs 3,700 collection points in Switzerland.

The majority of the 63 billion aluminium and plastic pods used throughout the world every year are thrown away, according to Fabrice Zumbrennen, CEO of Migros, at the launch of its “revolutionary” product CoffeeB. In late November, Nespresso responded, announcing that it would be releasing pods made from compostable paper in the spring.

coffeeb.com
nespresso.com
nestle-nespresso.com