

Kosher at the Coffee House

With coffee houses as popular as ever, kosher consumers can often find themselves bewildered by the offerings and understanding what is kosher and what is not. We'll try to address some of the issues here and provide some practical guidance. Note that the discussion here is not intended to apply to Pesach.

Basic **black coffee**, regular or decaf, is generally acceptable and can be purchased in stores, whether coffee shops, convenience stores or the like. Sugar in packets or jars presents no problem, and artificial sweeteners like Equal, Sweet N Low and Splenda are all nationally certified. Creamers can be an issue, however.

Flavored Coffee requires certification on the beans or grounds as flavors have been applied to the beans in order to brew a flavored product. Likewise, liquid flavors for addition to brewed coffee require certification. Many national brands of liquid coffee flavors are OU, OK or Kof-K certified – check the label prior to use.

Powdered creamer is pretty much always dairy even when it is called “non-dairy” on the label (discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article). Powder creamers must have acceptable Hashgacha on the label; many are OU-D certified. Specific kosher brands are available that are Pareve; practically these are not found in coffeehouses.

Liquid Creamers come in various forms: milk or cream, non-dairy, soy and flavored:

Milk and Cream – milk, whether skim, 1%, 2% or whole is acceptable for kosher use (provided one is not particular with regard to *cholev Yisroel*). Half and Half or Cream can present a problem. It is not uncommon to find Half and Half and cream that is stabilized with mono- and di-glycerides which can be animal fat derived. Therefore, it is best to use Half and Half or cream only with a hechsher. Individual serving cups follow the same rule as larger containers.

Non-Dairy creamer – again, is almost always dairy (unless one of the kosher brands that is certified pareve) and requires acceptable Hashgacha on the label.

Soy – many brands of soy milk and even soy creamer are available and have certification on the label. *Silk*, a popular brand that now makes a soy creamer, is kosher but certified Dairy Equipment. Check the label of other brands for the hechsher.

Flavored Creamers – often come in individual serving sized cups, these are most often dairy based with flavoring added and require Hashgacha on the label.

Coffee Drinks like lattes are flavored beverages. There are several matters of kosher concern with such drinks. If the store you are visiting is not under certification, purchasing any drinks made on premises becomes your kashrus responsibility!

First, the actual ingredients used in making the drink must obviously be kosher. Different coffee-houses use different suppliers; sometimes even the same “brand” store may have different suppliers of ingredients at different locations, especially in different regions of the country. One would need to check each ingredient used for proper certification to be able to ascertain if a drink could be kosher.

Second, the process of making coffee drinks often involves using a steamer and/or blender. The use of a blender would not present a problem providing that it is washed out prior to making your beverage. The steamer can present a kashrus problem. If non-kosher beverages are heated using the steamer arm, it can become a non-kosher utensil and can render further products made non-kosher. In addition, residue is very

often present on the steamer arm from one drink to the next, and actual non-kosher ingredients may be introduced into your drink.

Retail coffee drinks that are available in grocery stores are often made in a different place than the same beverage sold in a coffeehouse. The product sold in the grocery store may have an OU-D on it, but the mix used in the coffee shop to make a drink of the same name may not be kosher! (Starbuck ® Frappacino being an example of this – sold in glass bottles in the store, Frappacino is kosher; in a Starbucks, the mix used comes from a different source and is not certified.) If you wish to purchase a drink made from a mix in a coffeehouse, you must check the label for certification first.

Teas are often sold by the tea-bag with a cup of hot water. Actual teas do not require certification – black tea, green tea, Darjeeling, Orange Pekoe are all examples of real tea. Herbal or Flavored Teas require certification. Some herbal teas may be dairy.

Non-coffee products are often sold as accompaniments in coffeehouses. Biscuits, cookies, yogurt, fruit, soft drinks and all sorts of other packaged goods may be offered for sale. Obviously, all of these require proper certification and should only be purchased if there is a hechsher on the label. Food prepared for sale at the coffeehouse likewise requires certification. Bakery items (muffins, slices of cake, etc) are often sold from display cases; these items can only be purchased if the whole store is certified or if individually packaged with a hechsher on the label.

Coffeehouses have evolved into complex establishments often more similar to restaurants than not. They present a somewhat complex situation to the kosher consumer. As always, consult your Vaad Ha-Kashrut or Rav for further, specific guidance.