



Spilling the beans

We investigate the big three coffee shops and their independent rivals to help you decide which one is best for your wallet, your waistline and your taste buds

Over the past decade, café culture in the UK has exploded and Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Caffè Nero are now household names.

In October and November 2007, we surveyed 2,637 members of the Which? online panel and found that two thirds had visited a coffee shop during the past month, with a fifth popping in at least once a week. With most of you picking a café for its convenience, it's not surprising that the 'big three' are the most popular destinations.

But, although market leaders Starbucks and Costa might have the most branches, bigger is not necessarily better. Our research shows that it could be worth going a few minutes out of your way to an independent for coffee that costs less and tastes better. For the health conscious, we also offer tips

on how to cut calories without missing out on your daily latte.

How much does it cost?

Our team of researchers visited 45 coffee shops around the UK to record prices of four popular products (see 'Coffee shop costs', opposite). Overall, independent coffee shops proved the best value. Of the chains, Caffè Nero proved cheaper than Starbucks and Costa Coffee for a cappuccino and a pastry.

For example, you'll pay an average £1.48 for a medium-sized cappuccino in an independent coffee shop compared with £2.29 in Starbucks. This difference might seem small, but if you buy a cappuccino on your way to work three days a week, you could save £126 a year by choosing an independent coffee shop over Starbucks.

In Caffè Nero, you get a double shot of espresso as standard

And while Starbucks coffees might be huge, in some cases you could just be paying for extra hot water. In Caffè Nero, you get a double shot of espresso as standard in regular and large coffees (although not in small sizes or espressos themselves), rather than the single shot in Starbucks and Costa, which we think makes Caffè Nero better value.

VERDICT If you are a coffee shop regular, or watching your pennies, you could save money at an independent.

What's in your cup?

A black coffee with no sugar has practically zero calories and fat. But start adding milk, sugar (about 16 calories a teaspoon), whipped cream or chocolate, and the calories shoot up. If you treat yourself to a large white chocolate mocha with whip (with whole milk) in Starbucks, that's 628 calories – more than a quarter of your daily recommended calorie intake. See 'Counting the coffee calories', left, for more details.

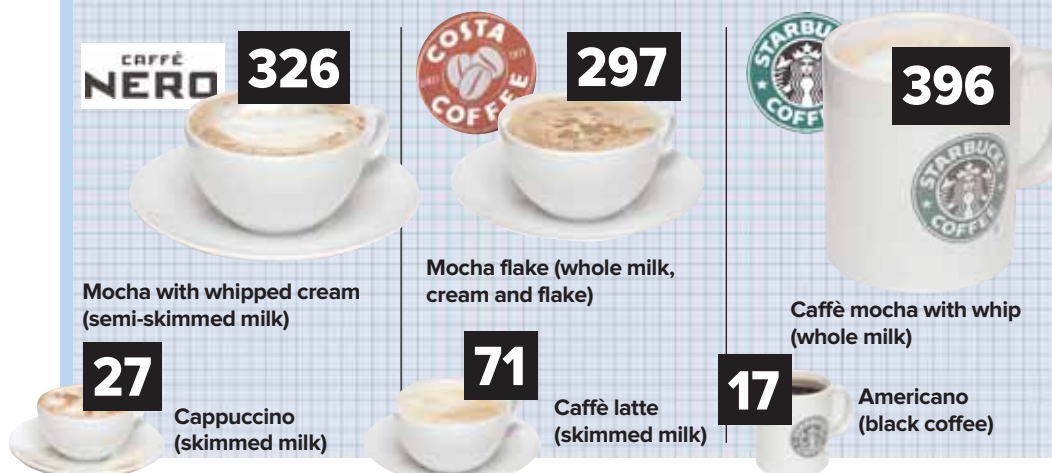
VERDICT Opt for a 'skinny' cappuccino or latte. These contain skimmed milk and have fewer calories and less fat.

What's on your plate?

It's obvious that a 'chocolate decadence cake' isn't exactly going to be good for you. But it's not always obvious which sweet treats have fewer 'nasties' than others. A classic blueberry muffin from Starbucks might

COUNTING THE COFFEE CALORIES

Calories shown are for a medium-sized coffee with no added sugar. All information taken from company websites in November 2007



Contacts

Caffè Nero www.caffenero.co.uk
 Costa Coffee www.costa.co.uk
 Starbucks www.starbucks.co.uk

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Kate Metcalf 35,
social work student

Kate is a self-confessed 'coffee addict' and buys coffee out at least three or four times a week. But she says she'll go out of her way to find an independent coffee shop and avoid big chains. Kate objects to the prices in the larger chains and thinks that independents offer better value.

Her favourite is the Off Beat Coffee Bar in Brighton, which has a 'quirky atmosphere' with 'good old-fashioned coffee and a simple menu'. She tells us: 'The big chains have so many fancy names for their coffees it's sometimes difficult to find a simple latte or filter coffee.'



Kate also prefers independents because she likes to support local people and their businesses. She says: 'I'm sure the environmental impact of a local coffee shop is far less than that of a multinational. So I choose them out of principle, as well as for atmosphere and price.'

have fruit in it, but it still contains 591 calories, more than a double-chocolate muffin (567 calories). And a fruity flapjack from Costa might sound healthier than the rich chocolate layer cake, but it actually contains higher levels of fat and saturated fat.

VERDICT If you fancy something sweet, try Costa Coffee mini muffins, which contain only 71-81 calories each. Or choose a reduced-fat muffin from any of the big three, which contains less fat and calories than standard ones.

More than a Big Mac

You might be surprised to know that some coffee shop sandwiches contain more calories, fat and salt than a McDonald's Big Mac. Four sandwiches at Starbucks and four at Costa exceed the 495 calories in a Big Mac. Five in Starbucks,

four in Costa and one in Caffè Nero contain more fat, and 32 in total contain more salt.

VERDICT Chicken or tuna and salad sandwiches are often lower in fat and calories than those with red meat or cheese. Beware high-calorie dressings.

Get the facts

The big three don't put nutritional details on unpackaged products such as cakes and drinks. However, if you want to know more, each has this information on its website.

Starbucks and Costa also told us that customers can ask in store for information. We'd like to see clear nutritional information available to customers in all stores. For more details on the nutritional values in coffee shops' food and beverages, visit www.which.co.uk/coffeeshops and check our extended tables.

	COFFEE SHOP COSTS				
	CAPPUCCINO (MEDIUM SIZE) (£)	ESPRESSO (SINGLE SHOT) (£)	PAIN AU CHOCOLAT (OR EQUIVALENT) (£)	CHICKEN SALAD SANDWICH (OR EQUIVALENT) (£)	TOTAL - ALL FOUR ITEMS
CAFFE NERO (9)	1.80	1.25	1.06	3.00	7.11
COSTA COFFEE (9)	2.27	1.33	1.55 ^a	2.85	8.00
INDEPENDENTS (18)	1.48	1.11	1.15	2.66	6.40
STARBUCKS (9)	2.29	1.40	1.17	2.71	7.57

Sample size in brackets ^a The closest to a pain au chocolat in Costa was a chocolate twist

Cappuccinos were the medium size available – actual sizes differ. Prices shown are mean averages for all stores visited. Visits were made in October 2007.

Taste matters

Our expert samples the big three's beverages

To test the quality and taste, we sent Giles Hilton undercover to a Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Caffè Nero in central London. Giles is in charge of buying and tasting coffee for tea and coffee experts Whittard, so he knows what a good coffee should look and taste like.

Giles ordered two popular coffees – an americano and a cappuccino – in each shop. He rated them for first impressions (appearance and temperature), taste and overall satisfaction. He then gave each shop a mark out of five for its coffee.



**Tea and coffee expert
Giles Hilton**

the best. Although still a 'bit watery', it was 'on the right track'.

Cappuccino

The ideal cappuccino should be a third coffee, a third milk and a third froth. Giles thought that both Costa and Caffè Nero served a good cappuccino. Starbucks' offering was only satisfactory and, while it tasted 'nice', was spoilt by being 'too long' and having too much froth. Giles liked Costa's cappuccino, saying that it was 'correctly presented and well balanced'.

However, Caffè Nero's cappuccino was his favourite. According to Giles, it was 'the most professional of the three'.

Americano

According to Giles, a good americano should contain a single shot of espresso topped up with a third to a half cup of hot water. But he felt that the americanos he ordered contained too much water.

Starbucks was the worst offender. Giles felt that the cup had too much water, which diluted the quality of the coffee and resulted in a 'faint coffee taste'. Costa's was also a little oversized and 'weak'. Giles liked Caffè Nero's americano

	BEST OF THE BEANS		
	CAFFE NERO	COSTA COFFEE	STARBUCKS
AMERICANO	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
CAPPUCCINO	Good	Good	Satisfactory
OVERALL SCORE	4/5	3/5	1.5/5