

## PEEVES

# Coffee lovers lip off about bad lids

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**BY JOYCE C. TANG**

COLUMBIA NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK -- When Robin Warshaw goes to Dunkin' Donuts for a caffeine fix, she never gets the small coffee, even if she's only hankering for a petite-sized wake-up call. Instead, she orders a larger size to get a dome lid instead of a flat one.

"I will buy a medium to get the lid I want," says Warshaw, who goes so far as to boycott establishments that serve coffee topped with lids she can't stand, among them the flat lids with a flimsy peel-back tab.

Warshaw complains that such lids scratch her lip, making for an unpleasant drinking experience. "I don't know whether it's the shape of my mouth or whether it's sensitive," she says with a measure of exasperation.

With almost half of American adults averaging more than three cups of coffee daily, the search for the perfect cup o' joe often boils down to the lid, and retailers seem to be taking notice with ever-growing options -- flat, dome, tear-away, lock-back, twist and slide. It's not uncommon to find lids with strategically designed grooves where overflowing coffee can pool, and interlocking, moving and removable parts.

"If I'm going to pay someone for my coffee, I want the experience to be pleasant," Warshaw insists.

Not even a recession can deter her.

"It's a measure of our culture," she says. "Everything's crashing around us," but it's OK to complain about the coffee.

Alison Blackman, a freelance writer who professes that she can't live without coffee, thinks of her daily encounter with coffee lids as a never-ending battle. The flat peel-back ones never catch properly, and they invariably end up chafing her nose.



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### A few of the different lids for coffee cups



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"I don't like being attacked by my beverage," she says. Once, while covering Fashion Week in New York and after being on her feet all day, the only thing she wanted was a rejuvenating liquid jolt of caffeine. But when she grabbed her cup, "the lid just popped off like it was possessed," Blackman says, spilling coffee all over her.

#### **A dome lid and a flat lid**

Even with all the lid options available, the tinkering continues.

An Australian company recently invented a smart lid that changes color from red to brown when the beverage beneath is cool enough to drink.

The medium and large coffees at Dunkin' Donuts come secured by a dome lid featuring a plastic locking arm that allows for a reclosable spout.

Last year, little green swizzle sticks started to appear on Starbucks counters. Known as splash sticks, they plug neatly into the small sip hole on Starbucks' dome lids.

Los Angeles resident Kathryn Alice says that when she discovered the sticks, she was thrilled. The devoted Starbucks drinker used to regard the signature dome lids as a necessary evil.

She blamed the lids for a stained stroller, a sticky diaper bag, even an almost ruined BMW transmission (when coffee spilled into the shift lever), not to mention an untold number of garment stains.

"Coffee lids are inherently poor design," says Bill Shadrach, who has worked in product design and marketing for companies such as Coca-Cola and Sunshine Biscuit, where he patented the "flap coupon," a coupon printed onto a hinged flap of a carton.

As a longtime coffee drinker, Shadrach concedes that some reclosable lids do a decent job of preventing spills, but he says they require a lot of fumbling if someone has only one free hand or is driving. The same goes for the harder-to-come by rotating lids.

Shadrach complains that it's never an intuitive decision about which direction opens and which closes such lids.

"The problem with those," he says, "is that in order to get them to work, you have to look at them. If you're driving in a car, that's not a good thing."

Shadrach, of Salt Lake City, has a patent pending on a plastic lid design that imitates travel mugs, with a sliding push-pull nub to open or close the lid. The prototype features vent holes that allow pressure to equalize and prevents what he calls the "geyser effect."

"The lid is an important part of the overall brand experience," says Andrew Hetzel, a marketing consultant to coffee roasters and retailers. "It's the little things."

But the little things come at a cost. The convenience of a dome lid means an extra few cents, an expense that gets passed on to the consumer, according to retailers.

There's also the environmental toll of dumping all those oil-based plastic lids to consider. Americans go through more than 17 million disposable coffee cups a year, according to International Paper, a leading paper and packaging product supplier.

Eco-Products, the nation's largest distributor of compostable food-service items, is expected to introduce the first biodegradable coffee lid in the spring.

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