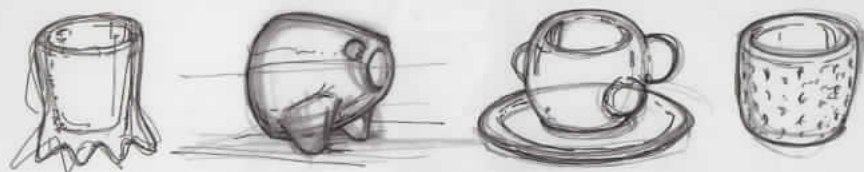


CAFÉ CULTURE

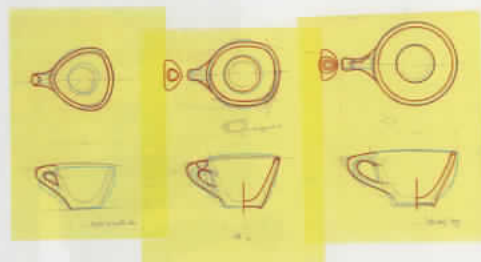
For hip coffee company Intelligentsia, NotNeutral designed a line of espresso cups that make the most of your daily fix

BY JOHN GLENDALL



1 BREWING AN IDEA

Even though it's consumed in a matter of seconds, espresso is eminently sensitive to the slightest of influences. There's the bean itself. Then there's the proper grind; how tightly it's packed in the machine; and the time, measured to the second, the water spends passing through the grounds. But even when the shot is perfectly executed, pouring it into the wrong cup kills the results. Chicago coffee and tea company Intelligentsia took all of this into account when it commissioned NotNeutral, the product design branch of Rios Clementi Hale Studios of Los Angeles, to create a line of cups for espresso-based drinks. "Every existing design represented a compromise, in terms of aesthetics or functionality," says Kyle Glanville, Intelligentsia's director of espresso research and development.



2 APPRECIATING THE DETAILS

First, NotNeutral considered the functional demands of the cup's form. "The pleasure of espresso is in the aromatics of its oils," explains firm principal Frank Clementi. "To experience that, your nose has to be able to get into the cup." But this is where a delicate balance of trade-offs sets in: if the cup opening is too big, the aroma and heat dissipate too quickly. Exploring different possibilities, the team triangulated the opening to create room for the nose, but ultimately rejected the design because baristas briefly swirl the coffee. The choice of material was easy: traditional ceramic doesn't affect the flavour, but provides ample thermal massing for the drink to stay hot as long as possible. Beyond the rigorous attention to function, the firm also addressed less tangible considerations: the social and cultural dimensions of coffee. "You hold the drink for about 15 seconds, but you might sit at the table for hours after dinner," says Clementi. "The cup becomes a character animating the table."



3 TASTING THE RESULTS

After over 60 prototypes, NotNeutral settled on the final design: stark white vessels in various sizes for espresso, lattes, coffee and cappuccinos. A discreet red band, partially concealed by the saucer, animates the bottom edge of each style, visually unifying them into a single collection. The series has already snapped up the Specialty Coffee Association of America's best new product award. And in June Michael Phillips used the cups when he won the World Barista Championships. But for Intelligentsia, it's always about the coffee. "The cups address every aspect of how coffee needs to be poured and tasted," says Glanville, "and they continue to evolve."