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**Taste-Off: The best flavored coffee pods -- and the undrinkable**

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Eating through stacks of coconut fudge, buttery toffee, salted caramels and raspberry truffles, then digging into crème brûlée and pumpkin pie may sound like dietary disaster, but when those flavors are infused into cups of no-calorie coffee, the results are just plain fun.

Those sips can be budget busters if you rely on a coffee house for your flavored joe, but single-serve, brew-at-home coffee pods are a tempting alternative. The pods come in a vast array of mouthwatering dessert flavors. Push a button, add cream and sweetener, and it's dessert in a cup. The pods are undeniably popular, despite the environmental impact (many coffee pods are not biodegradable), and the fastest growing category in packaged coffee.

But navigating this java-based dessert buffet yields varying results. The best pods are filled with top-notch coffee, infused with natural extracts and spices that deliver bold aromas and flavor notes. The worst offer substandard coffee grounds laced with poorly engineered extracts, best poured down the drain.

For this tasting, each coffee was tasted fresh, then re-tasted at room temperature. Each was also tasted with creamer, an addition that improved the flavor of nearly every cup. It's important to note that not all single-serve pods are compatible with the newest Keurig 2.0 brewer, but there are workarounds, including San Francisco Bay Coffee's "Freedom Clip," a free plastic insert that clips to the machine and allows it to "read" all cups as compatible.

Here's the scoop on the best flavored coffees -- and the totally undrinkable.

***Starbucks Mocha***

The smooth flavor of deep, nutty cacao underscores an excellent blend of deep-flavored coffee. Add a splash of cream and it's dessert in a cup. A box of 10 is $12.95. (4 stars)

***San Francisco Bay Pumpkin Spice***

Pumpkin pie in a coffee mug has always struck me as odd, but the punch of aromatic cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg is a great combination for those who love a bit of spice. The biodegradable cups of this bargain-priced coffee are also a big plus. A box of 12 is $7.99. (4 stars)

***Seattle's Best Toasted Hazelnut***

Smooth, sweet, light-roasted coffee kicked up with bold hazelnut flavor makes for a great cup of dessert coffee. The toasted flavor is a great twist. A box of 16 is $14.48. (4 stars)

***Organo Gold Black Gold Premium Chocolate Almond***

Fans of almond extract will enjoy this ultrasmooth cup of flavored joe. The coffee is understated, allowing the pungent almond perfume to shine. A box of 12 is $24.95. (3 ½ stars)

***San Francisco Bay Hazelnut Crème***

Deeply roasted top-quality coffee laced with hazelnut extract and a caramel note make for a bold cup that's perfect for those who love, first and foremost, the flavor and aroma of fresh coffee. These cups are 97 percent biodegradable. A box of 12 is $6.95. (3 ½ stars)

***Barnie's Coffee Kitchen CupUp Crème Brulee***

Calling this caramel-flavored cup crème brûlée is a bit of a stretch, but the fresh, light roast coffee is a great backdrop for the caramelized sugar. A box of 10 is $10.99. (3 stars)

***Cake Boss Raspberry Truffle***

Even though the chocolate flavor is absent, the luscious aroma and flavor of raspberry is bright and lingering, even after 30 minutes. The lack of freshness in the java itself is the top reason this brew does not score higher. A box of 18 is $10.99. (2 ½ stars)

Barnie's Coffee Kitchen CupUp Cool Café Blues

This inspired combination of spice and nuttiness is a surprisingly successful -- if mysterious -- blend. It's a good pick for those who like chai and coffee -- in the same cup. A box of 10 is $10.99. (2 ½ stars)

***Hurricane Coconut Fudge Typhoon***

The promise of fudge is a bust, but the splash of coconut turns this coffee into dessert. A box of 18 is $10.99. (2 ½ stars)

***Barnie's Coffee Kitchen Café Au Chocolat***

The hint of chocolate is fine, but overall, this is a disappointing cup. A box of 10 is $10.99. (2 stars)

***Guy Fieri's Flavortown Roasts Bananas Foster***

Only those who love all things banana will be charmed by this ultralight cup that's flavored with a touch of banana extract. The flavor combination works better with a dash of creamer. A box of 24 is $17.88. (1 star)

***Crazy Cups Spiced Gingerbread***

What gingerbread? Kudos to the company for its creative flavor ideas, which include Cinnamon Churro, Apple Pie a la Mode and Caramel Truffle Sundae. Now they need to actually infuse those flavors into the coffees. A box of 22 is $15.90. (1 star)

***Green Mountain Hazelnut***

You have two minutes to drink this. The toasty aroma of hazelnuts fades to nothingness if you don't gulp this straight from the brewer. A box of 18 is $10.99. (1 star)

***Hurricane Butter Toffee Tsunami***

No toffee and no butter coupled with stale, bitter coffee make for an unfortunate cup. A box of 18 is $10.99. (No stars)

***Barnie's Coffee Kitchen Santa's White Christmas***

Mint and coffee are not exactly a perfect pairing, but when the coffee is weak and the mint tastes more like pine, the result is undrinkable swill. A box of 10 is $10.99. (No stars)

Reviews are based on product samples purchased by this newspaper or provided by manufacturers. Contact Jolene Thym at timespickyeater@gmail.com. Read more Taste-off columns at [www.mercurynews.com/taste-off](http://www.mercurynews.com/taste-off).