

PURSUITS

The Newest Antidote to Burnout

The South Korean practice of “hitting mung,” aka zoning out, is spreading throughout the world.

Every year, dozens of South Koreans escape the crowded streets of Seoul and gather among the fragrant cedar trees in the Seogwipo Forest of Healing. They turn off their phones, remove their shoes, and sit in silence. Over the next 90 minutes, a team of referees of sorts periodically measures the pulses of the sitters, who are asked to dress in professional attire, which for some is a pencil skirt and for others a white lab coat. The participant with

the most stable heart rate and the most votes from their peers wins. That’s right, these urban dwellers are competing in the annual Space Out Competition, where slothfulness is prized above all.

The aim is to normalize setting aside time to do nothing in the company of others, says Woopsyang, a visual artist and creator of the competition who goes by only one name. The practice is called “hitting mung,” and as the grammatical structure suggests,

Valeria Agadzhanova / EyeEm

it’s as much a verb as an intention. “Any time spent doing absolutely nothing is often followed by guilt,” says Woopsyang. “We need to change that by creating these spaces.” Surprisingly, K-pop artists are the ones who have helped popularize the idea across the world, with similar competitions now being held in Europe and other parts of Asia. Another unexpected twist: high-strung professionals are often among the event’s winners.

Over the last year, hitting mung has migrated from the forest floor to Seoul’s thicket of skyscrapers, where stressed-out urban residents are seeking refuge at the movie theaters. But instead of zoning out to the latest blockbuster, they are gazing at wispy clouds moving across the screen, or a crackling fire. The scenes of nature are meant to help people unwind, but in a communal, easy-to-access setting. Others are hitting mung at a new type of cafe popping up around town, where barefoot patrons simply sit in silence staring out a window or at a wall. (Of course, there is irony in the fact that people are paying money to do nothing.)

This is very much a reflection of the collective yearning to be close to another after being isolated for so long. People are craving an escape, both from their apartments and from inside their heads. Learning to feel comfortable zoning out in the company of others, though, first requires examining cultural values around busyness. Space Out was created both as an event and as an art installation that destigmatizes doing nothing.

The idea—which is similar to flotation pools or forest bathing, except it’s less expensive and can be done even in densely populated cities—is built on the theory that stillness and exposure to natural stimuli help soothe the nervous system and refocus the brain. Researchers have found that this practice, based on ancient Buddhist and Confucian principles, reduces cognitive load and enhances creativity. Think of it as being like recharging a battery, says Grace Yoon, founder of Qi Alchemy, a traditional East Asian medicine company. But instead of using diesel, which is accompanied by some nasty side effects, this is the equivalent of plugging into a renewable energy source. “When you’re hyperfocused and overworked, you’re not thinking deeply,” she says. “You need to be unproductive to be productive.”

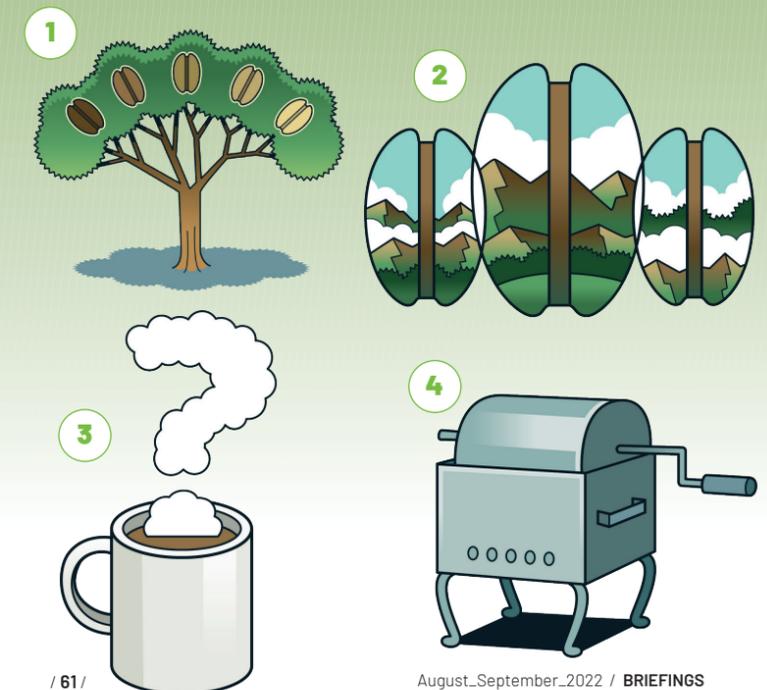
Illustrations by PETER AND MARIA HOEY

THE ART OF

Selecting Coffee Beans

Coffee beans are among the world’s most valued commodities, with more than 2 billion cups of coffee consumed each day. A good cup of joe, though, is more than just a productivity hack. It’s something to be savored.

- 1 Learn about varieties.** Arabica is delicate, while robusta, the typical supermarket variety, is more bitter.
- 2 Identify a region.** Different geographies and elevations produce different flavors, from fruity to earthy to rich and caramelly.
- 3 How will you take that?** Blends are often smoother and cheaper for those who like to add cream and sugar. A single-origin coffee allows the connoisseur to appreciate nuance.
- 4 Select the roast.** The lighter the roast, the more the caffeine and complexity. The longer and more intensely a bean is heated, the more the roast flavor takes over.



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