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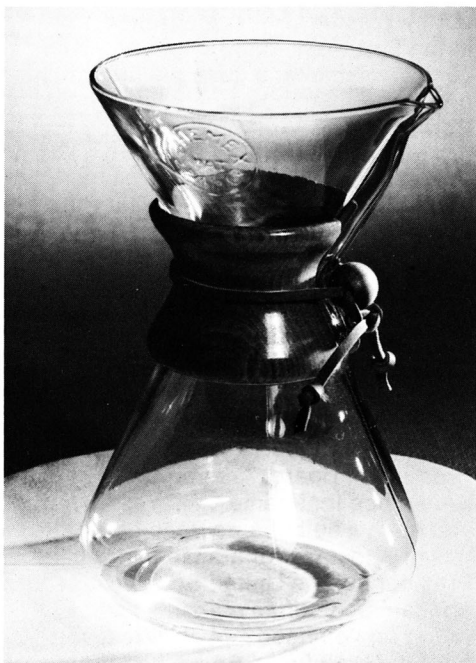
1941 Chemex Coffee Maker

The Chemex coffee maker, which brought a scientific idea to a food-making process, was the invention of Dr. Peter Schlumbohm. The son of a wealthy chemical industrialist in Germany, Schlumbohm waived his share of his father's estate on the condition that the family would underwrite his education for as long as he wished. For eight years Schlumbohm was a professional student at the University of Berlin, until he carelessly completed a doctorate and found his legacy terminated.

He came to the United States in 1935 and, although admitting to an intense interest in money, he hated big business, feeling it was handicapped by inertia and conservatism. Because of this, he was always self-employed, inventing and marketing his own products. Dr. Schlumbohm's death, in 1962, cost design one of its great individualists.

When Schlumbohm was asked for information about himself and the Chemex coffee maker, he said he had intended to write about the Chemex and that our inquiry had provided him with the incentive to do so. "The success of the Chemex coffee maker had been riding on the tidal wave of the Bauhaus style. I was not a 'member' of the Bauhaus, but I share two of its important roots: the 1921 Wandervogel revolt and World War I. One of the aspects of our new generation crystallized as Bauhaus style: A table must be a table; a chair must be a chair; a bed must be a bed.

"When in 1938 the personal desire for coffee came up (I had been a tea drinker) my answer was: 'A coffee maker must make coffee,' and then I applied my knowledge of physics and chemistry. Except for filing the patent and having such a coffee maker made up by a glass blower for my personal use, I had no plans for its commercial exploitation, but a need for funds prompted me to license it. Practically every famous



appliance manufacturer in this country turned it down. So in 1941 I designed the quart model, which, except for very minor details like the shape of the pouring lip—has never been changed in all these 19 years. I coined the mark 'Chemex' and formed the Chemex Corporation.

"It took months before I had a product. I placed it on the desk of Macy's housewares buyer. 'What's that?' he asked. 'That is a coffee maker.' 'That is not a coffee maker!' 'Why not?' 'It does not look like one. . . .' We discussed prices and the filters. 'You are licked before you start.' 'Why don't you take it home and try it? If you like it, you can introduce it.' The next morning, it came over the phone: 'O.K. Doc, we will run an ad on May 24.' That was in 1942. Now I needed a girl Friday, and in my good luck strain I found Marie Foley, who became our vice-president. In my Manhattan apartment the two of us assembled the first 500 Chemex coffee makers and sent them

out by Western Union messengers. In the first week Macy's sold 54. Then John Wanamaker's gave the first gross order and then . . . came a letter from Corning Glass Works: 'Unless you can procure an A-5 Priority Rating, we can no longer supply you.'

"That seemed to be the end. I wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, telling him about our plight and heading the letter with 'Minima Rex Non Curat [a king does not bother with details]. President Curat Et Minima [a president cares even about details].' The Latin pun probably did it. Three days later the phone rang: 'This is the Office of the Chief of the War Production Board. Are you Dr. . . . I can't pronounce that name. . . .' 'Yes.' 'Well, you have a hell of a nerve to bother, in this greatest war of human history, the President of the United States with your goddammed coffee maker, so what rating do you need?' 'A-5.' 'Well, you have it. Good luck.' So we had a product and we had production. Now came the all-important problem of merchandising.

"I decided on a few principles: to grow organically, slowly, by true demand, based on the quality of the product, each owner becoming a demonstrator. Negatively, this meant not to engage salesmen, not to sell to jobbers, not to sell to any number of stores, not to allow price cutting, in short, not to aim at volume. This conservative approach worked out well and saved us in times of general 'recessions.' No dealer ever canceled an order, and we got paid for nearly 100 per cent of our invoices at our strict payment terms. This kept our own funds liquid, and in spite of constantly growing sales volume, we never needed bank loans. Had I operated differently, sales, no doubt, would have been much larger, but the quality would have suffered."

The operation of the Chemex is simple. A circular piece of filter paper, similar to that used in laboratories, is folded into

quarters and inserted into the upper cone of the glass structure. Ground coffee is spooned into the filter cone and hot water is poured into the upper container. The water infuses the grounds and filters to the bottom container where it can be kept warm on a low burner. The coffee produced is the best possible, according to experts, because the water is not boiled in contact with the grounds releasing the oils and other harsh-tasting agents. The coffee is also filtered making a clear and grounds-free drink.