

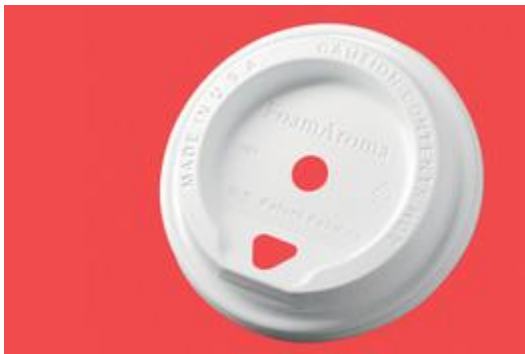
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Modest Miracles of Invention

What a new coffee lid says about today's innovators

At the recent Crunchies Awards in Silicon Valley, the audience was nerdy and the host British: Cambridge-educated comedian John Oliver. It seemed an odd pairing, like finding scones on the menu at In-N-Out Burger. But Mr. Oliver was an inspired choice for a night lauding technological innovation. He comes from Birmingham, a global hub of progress in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The Lunar Society of Birmingham included such "Lunartick" geniuses as Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles), Josiah Wedgwood (industrializer of pottery), Joseph Priestly (discovered oxygen) and James Watt (developed the steam engine). They met every full moon and pretty much kicked off the industrial revolution. Invention has always come from everywhere—not just London, not just Silicon Valley.



J. Scott Collard

Innovation isn't just about big ideas. The FoamAroma lid aims for a better sipping experience.

The Valley admits this, of course. Folks here instinctively and avidly support immigration reform, particularly to end the nonsensical 65,000-a-year cap on H-1B visas for foreign specialty workers. And the Crunchies featured a category for best international startup.

But as we clapped for the winner, SoundCloud, I realized what has really changed my life lately is not a social sound-sharing platform from a Berlin-based startup. It's a coffee-cup lid from Kalamazoo.

U.S. lid demand, one study estimates, will show a 4.9% yearly rise to \$1.2 billion in 2016. We use a lot of them. But in the lobby of the Four Seasons Silicon Valley last month, grabbing a decaf to go, I noticed just one. The opening to drink through was triangular, not circular, and placed on a slant, with a slight indentation just below, fitting the lower lip. A second opening, a pencil's diameter in the middle of the top, aerated and slightly cooled the drink. Suddenly, all infantilizing side effects vanished: no sucking, no dribbling. Plus, because of the central opening, there was actual coffee aroma.

Forget coffee snobbery—I'd drink it cold, two days old, out of a saucer—this is about something sligher, something simpler: Innovation that won't make any awards ceremony but will make your day.

The FoamAroma lid comes from Craig Bailey, who came up with and developed his idea in Portland, Ore., and Kalamazoo, Mich. In 2001, Mr. Bailey was a paper-mill project manager when he met Jay Sorensen, inventor of the Java Jacket insulating cup sleeve. Years later, the 2010 earthquake in Chile put him out of a job (the country exported 8% of the world's pulp supply), so he asked for Mr. Sorensen's advice. "Just do the next thing," he said.

Mr. Bailey tinkered in his kitchen, using clear plastic prototypes and colored water to test liquid movement in the cup and spillage patterns. He's not the first to tackle tops. The first patent for a drinking lid was issued in 1935. The archetypal Solo lid was featured in the 2004 Humble Masterpieces exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and a 2007 show at the Cincinnati Museum of Art featured a range of tops. But Mr. Bailey had his own ideas.

He insisted on the triangular drinking hole and the slant, through which to coax the coffee. He added the middle aerating hole to create fluid dynamics, ensuring calm waves of liquid throughout, rather than aggressive rushes up and over the sides ("the geyser effect"). Because warm milk reacts with more-common polystyrene tops, making them brittle and loosening the seal over the cup's rim, he chose a more flexible material for his lids. You can use them more than once.

In 2011, Mr. Bailey did a first product run. He now holds a patent for the lid in the U.S., Canada, Australia and 27 euro-zone countries. FoamAroma lids—four million of them sold last year, at a penny apiece—are made at a factory in Florida, not Taiwan. "If I can fly the flag, I fly the flag," he says. [Starbucks](#) [SBUX +0.91%](#) chose the lid for its experimental new Tazo tea store in Seattle.

So while the Brookings Institution just released a fretful report on "Invention and Economic Performance in the United States and its Metropolitan Areas"—listing Portland 15th, with no mention of Kalamazoo—we can be more optimistic. Yes, the growth rate of U.S. adults with a college degree has slowed over the last three decades, but an ingrained, inventive attention to other human beings seems to persist.

Amid all the beverage-industry hoopla, Mr. Bailey noticed what others hadn't: Coffee makers and proprietors, behind the counter, sip from nice (top-free) ceramic cups. "Most baristas and coffee-shop owners don't drink from paper cups. They don't experience what customers do," he says, and so they miss the real point. "A lid is not just a lid."