

Capital Coffee- Black Sheep Coffee

Black Sheep Coffee arrived in Edinburgh in 2021 and has already proved popular.

Its intention is to compete directly with the established coffee chains. One thing that puts off coffee lovers from going into the big chain cafes is the sheer inconsistency. While some of the baristas in these places can produce good coffee, it's very hit and miss. However, there are other reasons that people go to chains, including sizable tables to work at and long opening hours.

Black Sheep has arrived to plug a gap in the market. In short, to provide good quality coffee in large venues which stay open well into the evening.

Last year they opened two large cafés. One on North Bridge and one in the new St. James Quarter, with a nice view out towards the only surviving section of the original St James Square. Black Sheep intends to open three more cafés in Edinburgh next year; two branches on Princes Street and one on George Street. The one on George Street will be right next door to Starbucks so will be in direct competition. Will Black Sheep soon start to overtake the established chains?



In my experience the care and attention paid by the baristas in Black Sheep is superior to the other chains, though they don't reach the same standards as the better specialty coffee houses. The staff in Black Sheep tend to be more attentive

about things like clearing tables and maintaining tidiness, as compared to other chains. They are certainly part of a general improvement in the quality of coffee available in the city. Standards are still variable but there has been a general upward trend, especially in the last ten years as specialty coffee has become mainstream. Increasing competition means that mediocre places struggle to survive.

Black Sheep began as a coffee pop up stall in Camden in 2013, and their cafés are now ubiquitous in London. Their spread across the UK has grown at pace in recent years. In Scotland, they also have branches in Glasgow and St Andrews. As they expand, Black Sheep are having to wrestle with the issue of growing while maintaining standards. This is a particular issue given the general shortage of baristas in the city. A lot depends on the quality of the training they give their staff. There are parallels with 'indie chains' such as 200 Degrees, which has several cafés in the North and Midlands of England. Having visited their café in Lincoln on a number of occasions, 200 Degrees seems to be proving that high quality is feasible on a large scale, even during busy times.



As to Black Sheep's coffee itself. I've sampled a number of their medium piccolos. Though a bit of a contradiction in terms, the drink is satisfying for those who find a flat white just a little bit milky. The coffee is traditional in character, by which I mean that it has clear Italian

characteristics, with a distinct bitterness and full body. Usually this comes from a portion of Robusta beans in the blend. Indeed Black Sheep uses a robusta bean (Robusta Revival) which is powerful, with dark chocolate and hazelnut notes. Robusta coffee is often considered far inferior to arabica by coffee specialists but good quality robusta does exist. Black Sheep have been sourcing theirs from southern India. Black Sheep also offers fruitier, more acidic beans such Blue Volcano, grown in Colombia. Black Sheep looks likely to become a prominent part of Edinburgh's coffee scene.

Can it maintain quality as it spreads, seemingly inexorably, across the city?

Black Sheep Coffee

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