

# Capital Coffee – Union Brew Lab

Union Brew Lab on South College Street is a manifestation of the way that specialty coffee has spread into the mainstream.

While many specialty coffee places are small, Brew Lab is a 'high volume' place, often using up to 35 kilos of coffee beans a week. Opened in 2012, it quickly became Scotland's largest speciality coffee shop. With its exposed brick and stone and industrial vibe it typifies the now ubiquitous specialty coffee aesthetic.



This 'mainstreaming' is also represented by Union, the coffee

roasters which teamed up with Brew Lab in 2019. Started in 2001 by two American scientists who wanted to inject San Francisco coffee culture into the UK, Union was founded on the principle of 'marrying high quality specialty coffee with responsible sourcing'. In short, a focus on high quality and ethical business ideals that is central to the specialty scene. While many specialty coffee roasters sell in relatively small quantities, Union Coffee itself is a roaster which has gone 'mainstream', with their coffee available in some supermarkets, such as Waitrose.

Union Brew Lab opens at 8 in the morning and doesn't stay quiet for long. Soon the place fills up with students and tourists and remains busy throughout the day, often becoming cacophonous with conversation fuelled by the coffee served. Customers enjoy the variety of seating available: from snug little concealed corners to comfortable armchairs next to the street. During August, Brew Lab's proximity to major Fringe hubs (such as Bristo Square) means it's absolutely teeming.



The test for a large, busy place such as this is how to maintain standards under such pressure. It's no coincidence

that most of the very best places in Edinburgh for specialty coffee are run by very small teams (such as [Source](#)), as this aids consistency.

The task of upholding consistent high standards is the task undertaken by Fraser Ballantyne. He has over a decade of experience in the field, as a barista, trainer and advisor. As well as overseeing the baristas at Union Brew Lab, Fraser runs regular [training courses](#). Courses such as the 'Espresso Masterclass' are ideal for those wanting to get the best from a home espresso machine – or a first step for those wanting to work in a café. The course introduces vital aspects of espresso, including types of machine, puck preparation and the key variables involved. These are dose (the amount of ground coffee), yield (how much liquid is produced) and time (how long it takes for the espresso to run). The course makes clear that pulling a good shot requires expertise and precision. It therefore demonstrates why the quality of what you get in many cafes is extremely inconsistent.





Firstly it's crucial to find the right 'recipe' for a particular bean, and then rigidly sticking to these ratios (between the quantity of ground coffee and water). It's then the 'dialling in' of the coffee every morning which is crucial to maintaining standards. As Fraser puts it, ensuring that every espresso made hits the "servable window", rather than perfection, is the aim. To achieve this involves getting the right grind for a particular bean. This is something that can take up to 20 minutes, even for experienced baristas. The real test is that this can all be affected by temperature and humidity, so that adjustments may have to be made *during the day*. In addition, attention to detail is vital. For instance, regularly purging the system, to ensure that used coffee grinds don't pollute the coffee.



## Training Lab

During the course Fraser demonstrated how very minor adjustments can transform something that is under-extracted and unpleasantly sour to something smooth and balanced with a lingering and satisfying finish – and vice versa. This process is particularly important in specialty coffee, where the beans used are so varied. It is this constant variation that is one of the most appealing aspects of the scene but does add complexity. In contrast, 'traditional' Italian style coffee blends aim for regularity, making the dialling in process much more uniform. Another important aspect is stretching, texturing and heating the milk correctly – for drinks such as cortado and flat white. Fraser relates that whole milk is the best to use (as it is easier to texture), though oat milk is improving all the time. One red flag is the amount of noise made. The process should be smooth and quiet, not loud and screeching "you should be able to have a normal conversation with a colleague whilst doing it".

Not only is the job of a barista an exacting one, it can also



be physically demanding. When it comes to producing the coffee, the coffee in the puck needs to be spread evenly (to avoid 'channelling' which ruins the shot) and compressed. This part of the procedure can lead to repetitive strain injuries, especially if the wrong technique is used. Baristas in busy places might be pulling several hundred shots a week in one week. Fraser is aware of at least one barista who had to undergo elbow surgery after years of wear and tear.

Clearly, being a barista at a place with high standards is not an easy job. Fraser admits that it can be "demoralising" when he loses a good member of his team. Many of those he employs are students who inevitably tend to move on. In addition, many of those most committed to specialty coffee seek out new experiences and environments, where they can evolve their skills. Fraser sees a general shortage of good baristas in the city with many leaving the scene during the Covid lockdowns, finding new sectors to work in which were perhaps less stressful.



Union Brew Lab shows the extent to which specialty coffee has become a common feature in Edinburgh, while its training

courses demonstrate, by revealing the precision required, why the number of truly excellent places in the city still remains limited.

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