

Capital Coffee – Lessons from London

It is often said that Britain is far too London-centric. However, in terms of specialty coffee, there's little doubt that many areas of London offer something special.

Specialty coffee has grown massively in London – from about 50 independent coffee shops in 2010 to more than 500 in 2020. The number means that competition is high and this seems to be one factor driving standards.

On a recent trip to London, I visited some highly rated specialty coffee places including **Origin**, **Ozone** and **Redemption**. I was served truly excellent coffee, beyond what is generally available in Edinburgh. Many of the coffees I had provided a warm glow, with their rich flavours seeping into the body rather than smacking me in the face. For 10 or 15 minutes after, the flavours were still in my mouth, still memorable.



Ozone, London Fields

Some in the specialty coffee scene do believe that Edinburgh is 'a contender'. Saf, one of the co-owners of the excellent **Beatnik** in Tollcross, believes that "No doubt London has some great places but Edinburgh is right up there, not far behind". There are undoubtedly several top class places in Edinburgh but only a handful currently match what I was served on my London trip. Why do standards seem to be higher?

What was striking was just how *busy* the cafés were. In Edinburgh, busyness tends to come in irregular waves. Undoubtedly there are more young professionals with disposable income (the typical target of specialty coffee places) in London, while population density is considerably higher. This means that the cafés require larger teams. To cope with the flow of customers such places need a good *division of labour*, as you would see in a professional kitchen.

High Ground (Islington) had a constant queue of customers. To

cope with this, they had *four* people working in a small café. The first was greeting the customers and taking the orders, the second was at the coffee machine, making the espresso, the third was at the end of the espresso machine, heating and texturing the milk. A fourth was assisting. This division of labour allows the baristas to really focus, and a rushed approach can ruin good beans. This is particularly pronounced in the chains, but is also evident in some independent cafés when staff members have to fulfil several roles. Such places just can't produce high quality coffee consistently.



Origin, Shoreditch

We've seen cafés such as **Artisan Roast**, **Fortitude** and **Machina** expand into larger premises. Fortitude have recently opened in Abbeyhill (while closing their original York Place café). Such specialists are starting to get the intensity of business you might find in London. The test will be whether they can maintain the standards. This may mean they have to invest by employing more staff, to allow the necessary division of labour. This is most apparent at one of Edinburgh's busiest –

Brew Lab – generally buzzing all day. At **Brew Lab**, there is a clear divide between those dealing with customers and those pulling the shots. Such a labour intensive approach can only be justified by places which are busy for several hours a day.



Fortitude who have recently opened a new café on Abbey Mount, Abbeyhill.

In London I also saw evidence of the further mainstreaming of specialty coffee. Something we also see in Edinburgh. It's now very common to see phrases such as 'specialty coffee', 'artisanal' on café windows. However, those places which emphasised these terms *most fully* didn't seem to have a clear commitment to specialty coffee culture, merely borrowing some of the aesthetics and language of the scene.

The best coffee I had in London was at **hōm** in Dalston. All it had on the window was the name of the café. It's clearly the

type of place which believes that building an excellent reputation will draw people towards it and it doesn't need to make a splash. In short, we need to be discerning if we want to really get the best.