

Union Brew Lab closes its doors

Fans of specialty coffee had some surprising news when one of the stalwarts of Edinburgh's coffee scene, Union Brew Lab, announced that it was closing after a dozen years in business.

A stark message on their website read: "After 12 wonderful years, Brew Lab is closing its doors this Wednesday 28th February. We want to thank everyone for the support and memories these past years".

Union Brew Lab has been consistently one of Edinburgh's busiest specialty coffee bars, generally packed full of students. In 2019 Brew Lab teamed up with prominent roasters Union. Brew Lab's bare walls and generally industrial vibe connected it to the original wave of specialty coffee in Scotland that took hold in the early 2010s. Brew Lab typified the now ubiquitous specialty coffee aesthetic. Union Brew Lab have also run while regarded training sessions for baristas, with manager Fraser Ballantyne delivering them in recent years – in their underground training lab.



However, there is *hope*. The location has been taken over by [Origin Coffee](#), based in Cornwall and one of the highest rated roasters in the country. Having [recently visited](#) their 'flagship site' in Shoreditch, I can attest that Edinburgh's coffee drinkers should be in for a treat. The coffee I had was meticulously made and brimming with flavour.

The place, situated fairly close to 'the City' also had to deal with the waves of extreme busyness experienced at Brew Lab. Origin also has an excellent coffee bar at the British Library near St. Pancras Station. Hopefully they will at some

point in the future open one in the National Library of Scotland! Origin have posted that they are “excited to be part of the next chapter of this incredible coffee shop which has been such an instrumental part of the speciality coffee scene in Edinburgh over the years.”

I popped along on Brew Lab’s final day to find the place teeming, with hardly a seat to be had. It’s that sort of lively feel which has drawn so many people towards it over the years. On most days, the place is full of cacophonous conversation and busy tapping on laptops. Many customers also enjoy the little nooks and crannies you can find in a location which, although above ground level, has an enclosed, basement feel. The armchairs at the front have allowed you to chill while taking in the architectural glory of Old College.



On this final day, many had also come to say goodbye to Brew Lab and thank the staff. When the call went out “just to let you know we’re closing in 10 minutes”, it was the end of an era. However, there seemed to be some confidence that there would be a degree of continuity despite the change of ownership. As one of the barista team put it, there was an expectation that “most of the staff will be kept on”.

The changeover was likely to take about six weeks. This will give time for new signage and equipment to be installed, and a makeover in the interior. Will we see the end of the bare walls aesthetic? The Shoreditch branch of Origin certainly has a pretty sleek appearance.



Manager Fraser Ballantyne seemed slightly less sure of the future. He hoped that there would be continuity in staff but that things would become clear after a meeting with Origin—“we shall see”. He was however delighted that Origin were going to enter the coffee scene and Edinburgh, given their high reputation.

This sudden shift is an illustration of the fluid character of the specialty coffee scene, with places opening and closing on a regular basis. The scene has grown markedly in the last decade but it's not an easy business to do well in. Costs are rising all the time, including the price of beans. Cairngorm Coffee have typified the issues faced; issues discussed on their engaging [Cairncast podcast](#). While their large location on Melville Place continues to do well, they were forced to

close their Frederick Street branch. We've also recently seen Castello Coffee in Bruntsfield change hands.

The coffee scene in Edinburgh continues its steady evolution and growth. Origin are about to add an interesting new flavour to the mix.