

Capital coffee – Format's fall

The steady expansion of the coffee scene in the UK, especially the rise of specialty coffee, has been represented in this column.

New places have opened in Edinburgh at a steady rate, with several of the new entrants (such as [Beatnik](#) in Tollcross) adding variety and quality to what is available. But, this expansion is not always smooth and many places have struggled and indeed fallen by the wayside. I have plenty of loyalty cards for places that no longer exist.

The difficulties of upholding the highest standards specialty coffee while maintaining a viable business are very evident. It's not an easy way to make money. An example of a specialty coffee bar wrestling with the issues thrown up by entering the mainstream is provided by Cairngorm Coffee. In their podcast [Cairncast](#) they regularly discuss the difficulties of facing an increasingly competitive market while still seeking to please the coffee purists seeking constant novelty. In short, 'how to stand out' in a 'saturated market'.

One specialty place that has failed to survive is [Format](#), 124 Buccleuch Street at the eastern tip of the Meadows. This place has demonstrated that producing consistently good coffee, as it has, is not sufficient. Format has had a number of peaks and troughs. Owner Andrew cut a rather dispirited figure as he discussed the imminent closure of his coffee bar. The place has, over the last few months, struggled to reach the type of turnover required.

This struggle has, Andrew admits, “been stressful” and has taken some toll on his physical and mental health. He admits that his wrists “are knackered” from all the coffee he has pressed and he’s sometimes struggled to sleep. He has poured much time, energy and money into making Format work. This includes investing in a custom-made machine, which has allowed him to make very minor adjustments to really bring the best out of the beans he has used. These have come from renowned roasters such as Edinburgh based Obadiah Coffee. It’s certainly not the quality of the coffee that has let him down.



Andrew feels that, with the expansion of the sector, the coffee market in Edinburgh “has become diluted... competition is crazy”. His local area was already competitive with Cult, one of the very best coffee places in Edinburgh, just two doors down. More recently, Greek influenced Lady and the Bear has

opened while Summerhall has significantly improved its coffee offer with the opening of the M.F. Coffee Project. These two entries have severely cut into his trade – Summerhall staff were “a considerable part” of his customer base.

The very wet weather this spring has been the final straw, completely decimating his takeaway trade as people sought out cosy dry nooks. Ultimately, “the business is no longer sustainable”. Andrew contrasts it with the lockdown period, when his trade was very strong – when customers were prepared to put up with lengthy queues.



It all highlights the fact that those who go to specialty coffee places do so for different reasons. Only a proportion focus primarily on the quality of the coffee. Many are looking for a place where they can study and work or a nice environment to meet up with friends. Format’s rather poky interior is not for such users (nor the lack of a loo for

customers). In contrast, the Lady and the Bear may offer inferior coffee but they do so in a beautiful setting, full of natural light and with superb views over onto the Meadows. As Andrew notes, the desire to sit in for coffee really dominates in a city with a climate such as Edinburgh's.

Only recently I enjoyed a week in Athens, where I was able, in April, to sit outside in a city square, eating and drinking coffee late into the night. That simply isn't possible in Edinburgh, apart from during very rare heatwaves.

The rising costs of specialty coffee beans has also been a factor. He's tried to keep prices steady but admits it's very difficult when many places are serving significantly cheaper "industrial coffee" but charging similar prices. Only a relatively small proportion are prepared to pay more for better. Rising staff costs and a difficulty of holding on to good baristas has also been a major headache ("sometimes I've trained people up for several months, only for them to move elsewhere").



Despite all this, Andrew retains his deep passion for specialty coffee and may get back in the game at some point. He lives in Portobello and thinks that there may be some opportunities to open something there -“but I won’t be rushing into anything”. And present though, Format coffee manifests the difficulty of maintaining a sustainable speciality coffee business. Format won’t be the last to struggle. As Andrew notes, “when a place as busy as [Brew Lab closes](#), you know it’s not easy”. It will be interesting to see how Origin Coffee get on having taken over Brew Lab’s premises. Things are never static for long in Edinburgh’s coffee scene.