

Capital Coffee – Little Havana Coffee Store

A relative newcomer to the city's coffee scene, [Little Havana](#) in Leith is an outstanding example of warm and engaging customer service – and excellent coffee.

This compact takeaway and coffee supplier near the foot of the walk is an offshoot of the tobacco store next door, The Pipe Shop, established in 1957.

For proprietor Steven MacKenzie, it was the deep knowledge of the area that meant the business was well-placed to diversify. While he concedes that rum and whiskey might seem the natural path, Steven feels that coffee fits the zeitgeist much better. Frankly he admits, dealing with drunk punters was not something he wanted. Coffee has a different vibe. So far he's enjoyed "good feedback and footfall" and feels the business is evolving nicely.



It's a family business with Steven's wife Ruth and daughter also working in the shop. They have a good number of regulars, but Little Havana is equally welcoming to new customers. While I was there, they had visitors from Germany and Cumbria, as well as a pair involved in the Foodies Festival. With them all, Steven went beyond the typical small talk and made genuine connections.

Little Havana has built up mutually supportive relationships with other businesses in the area. In particular, he points

people in the direction of **Kvasa Bakery** across the street (“the guys there really deserve to do well; they work very long hours”) and **Remedy** up the road (“best breakfasts in town”).



He feels that there is “a gap in the market” for places such as Little Havana; offering something a bit different from the chains and from the specialty places, such as Artisan Roast, just a few metres down the road. He sees Little Havana as primarily a coffee supplier, offering an extensive range of beans.

They presently have about 30 coffees but hopes to expand that to 50, extending the range of countries represented: “our place isn’t a homage to any particular type of bean or region”. For espresso-based drinks they usually offer a fairly dark roasted Brazilian blend.

This is a bit different to the lighter roasts prioritised by the speciality places. A darker style is something more familiar to those from southern Europe; not a bad idea given the number of Spanish and Italian people in Leith, even post-Brexit.

For Steven, it’s all a learning experience, with the business evolving organically as he meets new customers and engages with new suppliers. He’s also planning to extend the range of teas available. “I feel that with the amount of good cafes around here and places like Pekoe Tea, this area can become a tea and coffee centre”.

A joiner by trade, Steven has done the interior himself, aiming to produce something “basic and clean”. The large front windows allow the sun to stream in, giving the place an airy uncluttered, almost minimalist feel.



On a bench outside you can watch the trams trundle past and

cyclists zigzagging down the walk. On a July morning, it was warm enough even for iced coffee, creating a bit of a “continental feel”. For Steven, the trams coming to Leith have been a boost to business, including his: “it’s helping to bring people to Leith”. The area is noticeably changing, such as the pub next door; from a spit and sawdust place to one with a noticeably “hipster clientele”. Yet, Steven believes, Leith retains its distinct character – he’s proud to stock the local magazine, [*The Leither*](#).

One aspect of coffee he’s focusing on is decaf, aware that too much caffeine isn’t ideal: “working here I enjoy drinking coffee a bit too much”. The samples of decaf I tried were very flavoursome, not the bland beans I’ve often tried. Another aspect Little Havana tries to emphasise is sustainability, trying to reduce the amount of plastic used and giving discounts to those who bring along containers for their beans and their own coffee cups.



Above all, the place manifests a passion for coffee and a desire to constantly expand their knowledge of beans and brewing methods. The next stage of the business will be to recruit an experienced barista: “I’d like to give them a lot of autonomy about the beans and blends we use”.

Already, Little Havana has shown great promise and is an example of the way in which the very best places serve great coffee but also act as vibrant communal hubs.

Little Havana Coffee Store
94 Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH6 5HB