

# Capital Coffee – Bastard Barista

A major theme of histories and sociological studies of Edinburgh have been the city's hidden aspects.

These include the powerful institutions which quietly wield power and influence. Also, the 'the custom' of its inhabitants of 'lying low in catacombs' – to quote the architectural historian Charles McKean.

## Covert coffee spots

We shouldn't be surprised that these 'customs' pervade many aspects of the city, even its specialty coffee scene. Some of the [best places](#) are found in slightly covert places. These include **Williams and Johnson**, tucked behind Custom House in Leith, and **Gamma Transport Division**, hidden away in the placid backstreets of Comely Bank.

The [Bastard Barista](#) on Queen Street is another. I was recently given a tip about this place. My 'informant' telling me not to be put off by the name or its slightly concealed location. You enter by heading down into the basement and then through a rather heavy front door. So heavy that you're not initially sure whether the place is open. However, as I stepped in, I felt immediately embraced by a warmly lit café, buzzing with chilled conversation and the hissing of the coffee machine. I had the sense of entering a secret meeting place. Thankfully, no suspicious eyes were cast on me, and there was no painful initiation ceremony to go through!



Instead, there was an appealing aroma of freshly ground beans – and an array of good coffees available on their ‘What’s in the grinder?’ board. They offer house espresso, a guest, a decaf, a V60 and AeroPress coffee. – and apparently ‘Edinburgh’s best matcha’. Plus, a nice selection of baked goods, which they are happy to warm up for you.

Beans by [Kickback Coffee Roasters](#) features prominently – an independent roaster based in Macclesfield, Cheshire. The V60 coffee is made using coffee by renowned Edinburgh roasters [Cult](#). For those not familiar with the [AeroPress](#), this simple pair of plastic tubes is perhaps the best way to make good coffee, inexpensively, at home. In contrast to the traditional Moka pot. it gives them a much cleaner flavour.

## Focus and precision



As always, having good beans is no guarantee of good coffee. On my first visit I saw the baristas showing the type of focus and precision needed to get the best from specialty beans. This care was also evident in the heating and stretching of the milk, which was done at low volume. *Not* the harsh screeching you sometimes hear. Their efforts were manifest in the excellent cup I had, which had stark but satisfying flavours.

Behind the counter, the baristas worked with busy efficiency and good teamwork. This is something I saw a lot of on a recent trip to London. There, the best coffee spots have a constant stream of customers, so require well oiled teams of baristas. Though less common, it can happen in Edinburgh. Somewhere such as the Bastard Barista will get waves, especially mid-mornings; they seem adept at dealing with them. This helps to add to the unrushed feel of the place.





The interactions I saw with customers were warm and good humoured. One set of tourists paid for their drinks and cakes using a few handfuls of coins that they had presumably picked up during their stay. Rather than finding this annoying, the barista assisted with the counting, helping them to weed out some stray coins from other currencies!

## Far from soulless

The humour is also found in the loos, where the left hand cubicle is the Men's, while the other is for females as 'Women are always right!'. The character of the place is also evident in the unusual but impressive styling of the place. On my second visit I found myself sitting beneath a stuffed squirrel, caught mid bite through an electric lead! I also discovered a charming 'secret' nook, opposite the front door. A small group were warming their cockles there on a bitterly cold morning. The Bastard Barista is very far from a soulless place.

The Bastard Barista has clearly already built up a substantial number of regulars, with several of them featuring on the wall

in annotated Polaroid snaps. Friendly gestures were given to those regulars who stepped in and unfinished conversations from previous days resumed with gusto.



In this review, I've had to overcome the dilemma inherent in giving publicity to a 'hidden gem'. The Bastard Barista is further evidence that in Edinburgh you can be just a few metres from tourist hotspots, and still find relative tranquillity. At the Bastard Barista, those few steps down into the basement take you into a different realm. Or, as they accurately put it themselves, 'a little gem nestled comfortably beneath Queen Street'.

Bastard Barista, 15 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JE.

<https://www.bastardbarista.com/gallery>