

Capital Coffee – Cairngorm Coffee

Cairngorm in Melville Place is one of the most elegant places to drink specialty coffee in Edinburgh. Its location provides those sitting outside one of Edinburgh's best views: along Melville Street towards St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral – a stunning sight in bright winter light. Cairngorm is also close to Dean Bridge and Dean Village. Fantastic spots to wander towards, clutching a cup of one of Cairngorm's well crafted brews in your hand.



No longer an underground movement

Established in 2014, Cairngorm manifests some of the trends we see in the coffee scene, including a general mainstreaming of specialty coffee. Cairngorm's original basement bar on Frederick Street, which eventually closed in 2023, was one of the first places I tasted specialty coffee in Edinburgh. Specialty coffee was then something new and distinctly edgy, represented by places such as Filament in the Southside. Their rather cool, harsh style is, like Filament itself, now a fading memory. Specialty coffee is no longer an underground movement – literally in Cairngorm's case.

Cairngorm's large corner premises at 'Melville', with its rather plush décor is representative of a turn towards comfort and gentle elegance within specialty coffee. This 'mainstreaming' is evident in the way that many new cafes 'ape' aspects of specialty coffee, including the aesthetic. At the same time, there's little doubt that specialty coffee places have increasingly eschewed some of the more extreme fruity coffees that were synonymous with specialty coffee in the 'pioneering' days. They have to please a wider variety of customers, not alienate people through overloading their palate.



It's clearly been a success, with the curtain of condensation in the vast windows evidence of its consistent popularity. On most days, opening the door will take you into a cacophonous space, filled with caffeinated conversation. Cairngorm is also one of the very few specialty places to open into the evening, staying open till 7pm.

Wrestling with the mainstream

In their podcast [Cairncast](#), Cairngorms' founder Robi Lambie regularly discusses 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', with highly rated newcomers such as [Beatnik](#) and Caf  n stealing the limelight.

As specialty coffee has gone mainstream, this has led some coffee bars to an awareness that their customers are looking

for different things. The number of 'coffee nerds' is relatively low. Many people who now visit specialty coffee bars have little awareness of the 'coffee scene'. Instead, they are looking for a nice place to meet a friend or a pleasant environment in which to crack on with some work or study.



The specialty scene was much smaller before, less of a sense of competition and instead more of a sense of 'us against them' (the chains). While customers want consistency of quality, to what extent do they look for variety? Coffee is such an exciting product that those in specialty coffee constantly want to experiment. But risky if you can't pull it off, if you can't dial in the coffee well.

A sense of familiarity

Cairngorm's view is that, ultimately, those wanting something different are a 'niche market'. The answer is probably to look for a balance by maintaining a typical house roast and then 'have fun' with guest beans; for the real coffee geeks who follow the latest trends regarding roasting and brewing. A sense of familiarity is, they argue, important for the 'mainstream' customers. They accept that, like customers at Starbucks, people do like the recognisable and are otherwise confused.

While the notion their customers might go to Starbucks might be seen as 'laughable' by some, this is the market specialty cafes have now encroached on. This manifested in the rise of 'Indy chains' such as 200 Degrees and 92 Degrees Coffee (who have a branch on Hanover Street). It's an appreciation that 'people want more than a coffee these days..they want an experience...go to a cute little coffee shop, take photos and videos, put it on their Tiktok'. They want 'a great space, awesome staff, a nice selection of baked goods or a good menu'.



There's also the commercial aspect, a 'slight sense of shame' about 'focussing on selling'. However, 'if the aim is to engage as many people as possible', they need to cater for these diverse needs. In growing, they are also expanding the specialty coffee market. That the 'aspiration' is to be buying large quantities of top class coffee, 'not dribs and drabs'. How far can you go in this 'democratic' direction before you 'damage your brand'? When do you start to 'cheapen aspects of what you are trying to do' and start to lose the loyalty of those who are the most discerning customers?



Small is beautiful?

This neatly sums up some of the dilemmas faced by those in the specialty coffee world. There's little doubt that the very best places in the city are small, with a consistent team of baristas. Cairngorm is an example of this; one which has successfully transitioned from the underground to the mainstream.

Cairngorm.

1 Melville Place,
Edinburgh, EH3 7PR