

Capital Coffee – cafēn and Edinburgh’s “world class” coffee

cafēn speciality brew bar on Dundas Street has, within a few months, created quite a buzz.

Already it’s built a very strong reputation for serving superb quality coffees in a lively, engaging atmosphere. For those with a keen interest in the intricacies of specialty coffee and the subtle flavours it offers, cafēn is definitely one of the prime destinations in the city.

Coffee celebrity

cafēn was particularly busy when large numbers were attracted by the presence of specialty coffee “celeb” Lance Hedrick. He currently oversees international wholesale for [Onyx Coffee Lab](#), “a coffee shop dedicated to the art and science of coffee”. Serious stuff!



Lance Hedrick at cafēn

His guest appearance attracted coffee geeks from around the city, including representatives from a number of [leading coffee places](#) in Edinburgh – including [The Source](#) and [Lowdown](#). It was fascinating to observe their interactions – and the commentary they offered on the coffees they sampled. It was evidence of the slightly cultish aspect of specialty coffee, as well as the desire to see constant innovation.

I arrived around 3pm, and had a distinct sense of arriving just as things were starting to settle down. cafēn owner Alex admitted that it had been something of “a crazy day”, as he tried to keep things running smoothly. There had been a very

long queue in the morning. However, they'd maintained standards; the coffee I was served was just as good as I'd had on calmer days.



The expert view

Sitting down with the coaterree of coffee experts to “chew the cud” was a good way to gauge the state of specialty coffee in Edinburgh. Those I talked to had significant experience as baristas, roasters and coffee tourists (exploring new places through coffee). From them I gathered insights about what they considered the best specialty coffee places in the city to be, and more broadly what they look for in a coffee bar.

What came through abundantly was the passion they all had about coffee. In particular, they were constantly seeking out new places and trying to connect. Lewis Gilchrist had recently visited Vietnam and Indonesia, discovering all sorts of unique beans and small underground cafes and roasters. Coffee can be a portal into the unknown.

Something experiential

What they really enjoy is the interaction you get when you discover others with a real passion for coffee. These are places looking for something experiential, based on personal recommendations from others with real know-how and passion. On the other hand, when they visited places that didn't offer that, they found the experience rather deflating. This is a reflection that specialty coffee places these days attract a variety of customers and only some are truly coffee geeks. A big test for cafés is trying to determine exactly who they are serving. Who among their customers is looking for that bit extra, something new, perhaps something with a slightly funky flavour profile. This tension between what coffee geeks want and what mainstream punters want is a common theme of discussion on coffee.

However the coffee experts I chatted to all had a sense that there were many others out there who might well enjoy specialty coffee but have not had access to it. Specialty coffee was not, by its nature, something that only a small elite can enjoy. "A lot of people don't know what's behind those doors".



A radically changed coffee scene

We need to keep in mind just how quickly things have changed. Looking at the *Itchy Edinburgh* from 2008 gives an idea of the changing coffee culture. Published just on the cusp of the rise of specialty coffee, the selection illustrates the changing nature of what we might consider a posh coffee place. The places suggested included *Cafe Florentin* (Giles Street) and *Elephants on Bagels* (Nicolson Square). These Edinburgh institutions were, in coffee terms, wedded to the idea that Italian style espresso was the ultimate in good coffee. These places offered a whiff of continental sophistication and

tended to be more food than coffee focussed. Also recommended was *The Elephant House*, currently in limbo. If it does return, it will be interesting to see whether it, in coffee terms, taps into current trends or sticks to its continental flavour.

Coffee culture has spread throughout the UK in the last 30 years or so, but this culture is not unidimensional. The rise of the now ubiquitous chains has been a major driver, specialty coffee has added unique aspects. We have seen the rise of Indy Chains, such as 200 Degrees (recently acquired by Caffè Nero) and Blank Street (a recent arrival in Edinburgh).



A source of pride

Places such as cafēn are raising the bar in terms of standard, adding to an already strong coffee scene in the city. For Andrew Flowers, previously a barista at a top rated place, certain places in Edinburgh are truly “world class”. They are something that the city should be proud of, in the same way that it is proud of its top restaurants, cocktail bars, craft ale houses, and whisky places. Edinburgh’s top coffee bars, including **The Source**, **cafēn**, **Lowdown** and **Little Fitzroy**, should be considered the equivalent of Edinburgh’s Michelin star restaurants and be promoted as such.

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