

# Capital Coffee – Artisan Roast's distinct flavour

Artisan Roast was one of the pioneers of specialty coffee in Edinburgh.

Opening in 2007, they now have four shops across the city (plus a kiosk on Little King Street), and a well respected roastery in Peffermill. Their first café, on **Broughton Street**, remains popular to this day. Deservedly so.



## Rising uniformity

One thing that is distinct about this café is its aesthetic, which is markedly different from most specialty coffee places in the city. Most of them have a fairly similar character these days, with Scandi-minimalism to the fore. Most places have become far sleeker with more of a sense of intentional

design. This has driven a certain uniformity to coffee shops, with some of the chains joining in, typified by the 'indy chain' [Blank Street](#), which recently arrived in the city (Victoria Street and Princes Street). The sort of cluttered quirkiness found at Artisan Roast on Broughton Street is now rare.

In Edinburgh, Leith – based SPLINTR commercial interior design has led the design trends. With their 'uncomplicated, thoughtful and contemporary design' they have been involved in a great number of [contemporary cafes and eateries](#). Though their designs are bespoke, there are common features such as the wood used and table design. Origin Coffee next to Old College has the distinction of being 'twice-SPLINTR'ed'. SPLINTR did the interior for its predecessor [Brew Lab](#), as well as the recent revamp following Origin's move there. The two interiors manifest different specialty coffee eras. Brew Lab had a darker, more industrial vibe, while Origin is sleeker and softer, with greater mainstream appeal.

## **A democratic space**





In this context, Artisan Roast on Broughton feels like a survivor from a previous era. No cool minimalism here. It's more like a slightly scruffy old-fashioned pub. The open plan aspect encourages conversation between the baristas and the punters. Interactions often take place between customers; which is rare in most places. On a recent visit, an exchange about the best Western Isles to visit broke out across four tables (Arran was the unanimous verdict).

The tables are a little bit wobbly, and nothing quite fits.

Yet, this may make it a more democratic type of place. This is evident in the clientele. When entering some of the more stylish and trendy specialty coffee places, I'm struck by the social narrowness, with a pronounced bias to the younger generations. It sometimes feels as if an invisible forcefield keeps out the over-45s. This is not evident at Artisan Roast.

We might see a café like Artisan Roast as more of a pub, in contrast to the trendier places which have a similarity to a city centre wine bar. It's a place to drop into and feel immediately relaxed. I recently found myself there just before the heavens opened. Sitting near the window, sipping a well-crafted cortado, I felt snug as I watched the torrents start to stream down the emptying street. A great port in a storm.





## A step back in time

The place is a slight step back in time. The music pulsing through the stereo is generally classic 60s and early 70s rock; Stones, Doors, Led Zep, Cream etc. Some of the customers may have been around during the era they were originally

released! More broadly, the place has a slightly bohemian feel. On two of my last three visits, I have seen Robert McDowall, Director of Summerhall sipping his Americano, conversing on varied topics. That's the sort of older, cultured vibe the place has. Among the customers there seems to be less of a focus on screens; I've seen several people reading physical newspapers, while the copies of magazines and newspapers in the rack seem to be well thumbed. Again, a sense of a step back from the modern world, away from digital overload.

The furniture might be described as shabby chic, all of it has seen plenty of wear and tear. It evidently wasn't designed with a cafe in mind. However, highlighted by the pew in the front section, there is lots of creditable repurposing going on in the place. This is inline with the original speciality coffee vibe, which had a primary focus on the contents of the cups, not providing a comfortable, immaculate setting.

Artisan Roast has four locations around the city. The differences between them suggest a significant amount of managerial autonomy. This is evident in the interiors. Though a similar size, the Bruntsfield has a different, less cluttered feel. There, they've done a good job of maintaining the character of the place, with a very tasteful refit that highlights the traditional slatted wooden interior. Their [Leith Walk](#) and Stockbridge cafes are marked by their airiness and the amount of sunshine that streams into them.

## What about the coffee?



I've detected some variety in quality across the branches, though I feel there has been more consistency in recent months. I would pick out the Bruntsfield branch as serving the very best among the four, though the Broughton Street branch also seems consistent. The baristas here seem to show the proficiency and focus needed to extract the crema laden goodness from the beans. The beans themselves are highly rated, with many customers who brew at home sourcing theirs



here. A range of their freshly roasted beans (including their popular Janszoon and Cobblestone blends) are available in shop, alongside a range of coffee making equipment.

In addition to good coffee, they offer something a little bit different in terms of atmosphere and aesthetic. They add something different to the scene; a break from uniformity, and ubiquitous minimalism. Such places have a greater warmth and are more welcoming to a range of customers. One defining aspect of specialty coffee is an embrace of a variety of flavour profiles. This is in contrast with Italian espresso, which has a very uniform flavour profile. It's good to see that some variety in the *character* of cafes is being maintained by eccentric little places such as the Broughton Street branch of Artisan Roast.

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