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New York Is Finally Taking Its Coffee Seriously

By OLIVER STRAND

NEW YORK used to be a second-string city when it came to coffee. No longer.

Over the last two years, more than 40 new cafes and coffee bars have joined a small, dedicated group of establishments where coffee making is treated like an art, or at least a high form of craft.

At places like Bluebird Coffee Shop in the East Village, the espresso is so plush and bright that it tastes sweet on its own.

The elaborate designs in the cappuccino's foam at Third Rail Coffee in the West Village aren't just to show off, but are a sign that the barista properly steamed the milk so that it holds its form.

At Abraço in the East Village, you can get drip coffee brewed by the cup, not drawn from an urn.

For years New Yorkers had to look to places like Stumptown Coffee Roasters in Portland, Ore., or Blue Bottle Coffee in San Francisco for this kind of quality. Now both companies have opened roasters and coffee bars in New York. Four Barrel Coffee of San Francisco will be roasting here soon.

Meanwhile, some established cafes around the city have made moves toward roasting their own beans. Café Grumpy is already doing it, and Abraço will by the summer.

This means that New Yorkers can now drink coffee that is made from some of the best beans available in the United States, freshly roasted in town.

The difference between a cup of coffee from these new style coffee bars and what was available before is striking.

These shops use only beans that have been roasted in the past 10 days (though some say two weeks is fine), so the flavors are still lively.

The beans are ground to order for each cup. Certain coffee bars have a skyline of grinders: one for espresso, one for decaffeinated espresso, one for brewed coffee. If they offer more than one variety of espresso bean, that gets its own grinder, too.

Milk is steamed to order for each macchiato or latte. A telltale sign is an arsenal of smaller steam pitchers, instead of one big one.

And coffee bars reaching for the highest rung use only manual espresso machines run by baristas who, in the past three years, have been able to attend classes given by the leading roasting companies in the intricacies of these devices. Many chain stores are turning to automatic machines with preset levels for coffee, temperature and timing.

For brewed coffee, there are French press pots, filter cones or machines like the Clover or Bunn's new Trifecta.

Some of the obsessiveness may get a bit off-putting. Want an espresso to go at Ninth Street Espresso? Forget it. The baristas there believe it should be drunk immediately from a warm ceramic cup. Want a cappuccino made from single-origin beans at Kaffe 1668? Sorry, you'll be told, but milk would overpower the subtle flavors of the coffee. Wonder why the barista pulled and tossed out two shots of espresso before she served you yours? She was making sure it was perfect, the coffee evenly tamped, the water temperature ideal for the particular beans, the timing just right. (The best baristas will "dial in" throughout the day, tasting the espresso and adjusting the grind and dose.)

Want a double espresso? You'll have to buy two singles.

Today, most of the chains use about seven grams of ground coffee for a two-ounce shot. Espresso pods are filled with around five grams.

Baristas at the best places in town, like Bluebird Coffee Shop or Joe, tamp down between 19 and 21 grams. Often the espresso is even more concentrated because it's pulled "short," with less water, so that the final volume is a thick 1.5 to 2 ounces.

With that much coffee — and care — put into each shot, baristas feel that a larger shot, with more water, would compromise the quality of the espresso.

This awakening has led some unlikely businesses to offer serious, artful drinks. Saturdays [Surf](#), a minimalist surf shop in SoHo, has a vintage la Marzocco machine next to the cash register. At Moomah, a children's center in TriBeCa, parents can enjoy one of the city's more artful cappuccinos.

Even restaurants, where coffee has long been an afterthought, are getting in on the act.

Superior coffee, day after day: increasingly it's the rule in New York, not the exception.

Here is a list of places in New York serving the best coffee. Included are 10 outstanding coffee bars that not only produce extraordinary coffee at the highest standards, but also do so with consistency, day after day. There are also coffee bars that serve particularly good drip coffee, restaurants with great coffee, coffee bars with nice baked goods and places to buy beans. A more complete listing, with a map, [is here](#).

The Top 30 Coffee Places in Manhattan and Brooklyn

ABRAÇO There's barely room enough for six standing adults, never mind the dozen or more who can crowd in during prime time. And yet in this cramped space the baristas turn out some of the city's best cappuccinos and drip coffee. There's a small, exquisite selection of baked goods, including a memorable cookie with cured olives. The owner, Jamie McCormick, will start roasting beans soon in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

86 East Seventh Street (First Avenue), no telephone, abraconyc.com.

BAKERI Pretty and crowded, Bakeri produces an astonishing variety of pastries and breads (there must be elves in the basement) and coffee that is sometimes as good as what's found at the city's most serious spots.

150 Wythe Avenue (North Eighth Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (718) 388-8037, bakeribrooklyn.com.

BLUE BOTTLE COFFEE The sleek Williamsburg location of this San Francisco import has single-origin espresso from a vintage San Marco lever machine, five Japanese slow-drippers that take 12 hours to make iced coffee and other unusual gadgets. All beans are roasted on the premises.

160 Berry Street (North Fifth Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 534-5488, bluebottlecoffee.net.

BLUEBIRD COFFEE SHOP So pleasant, it's disarming — tiny and flooded with sunlight, it's easy to sit and linger over one of the pastries baked here daily. But the coffee is exceptional. Katie Duris, one of the country's most respected baristas, sets a high standard: the espresso is bright and lush, the cortado a sublime balance of coffee and steamed milk.

72 East First Street (First Avenue), East Village, (212) 260-1879, bluebirdcoffeeshop.com.

BREUKELEN COFFEE HOUSE Stumptown coffee and Balthazar pastries during the day, [art](#) openings and D.J.s at night.

764A Franklin Avenue (St. Johns Place), Crown Heights, Brooklyn, (718) 789-7070.

CAFÉ GRUMPY Café Grumpy always offered the city's widest variety of coffees by the cup. Caroline Bell, one of the owners, is still committed to bringing in selections from some of the country's best roasters. Grumpy recently inaugurated a roaster at its Greenpoint shop. A third location, in Park Slope, Brooklyn, is more coffee bar than cafe, and better suited to standing when you drink your flat white.

224 West 20th Street, Chelsea, (212) 255-5511; 383 Seventh Avenue (11th Street), Park Slope, Brooklyn, (718) 499-4404; 193 Meserole Avenue (Diamond Street), Greenpoint, Brooklyn, (718) 349-7623; cafegrumpy.com.

CAFÉ PEDLAR A joint venture by Frank Falcinelli and Frank Castronovo (Frankies Spuntino and Prime Meats) and Duane Sorensen (Stumptown Coffee Roasters), with a Cobble Hill location that's large, airy and popular with the stroller set, and a Lower East Side space that's more intimate.

210 Court Street (Warren Street), Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, (718) 855-7129; 17 Clinton Street (East Houston Street), (212) 253-2303, cafepedlar.com.

LA COLOMBE TORREFACTION A Philadelphia company known for its darker roasts. It opened a loft-like TriBeCa storefront in 2007 and a more streamlined coffee bar in SoHo in 2009.

319 Church Street (Lispenard Street), TriBeCa, (212) 343-1515; 270 Lafayette Street (Prince Street), SoHo, (212) 625-1717, lacolombe.com.

CULTURE ESPRESSO BAR Culture is part of the Australian coffee diaspora (one owner is from Down Under) and one of the few serious coffee bars in Midtown.

72 West 38th Street (Sixth Avenue), Midtown, (212) 302-0200, cultureespresso.com.

EVERYMAN ESPRESSO It's little more than a handful of tables and a coffee counter in the lobby of the [Classic Stage Company](#), an Off Broadway theater, but its owner, Sam Penix, is much admired by espresso-heads.

136 East 13th Street (Third Avenue), East Village, (212) 533-0524, everymanespresso.com.

FIVE LEAVES The baristas at this restaurant can hold their own with the city's leading coffee bars. The affogato is transcendent: two shots of espresso served with vanilla [ice cream](#) from the General Greene, it is the best in the city.

18 Bedford Avenue (Lorimer Street), Greenpoint, Brooklyn, (718) 383-5345, fiveleavesny.com.

GIMME! COFFEE Ithaca-based Gimme! Coffee has been counted among the city's best coffee bars since it arrived in New York in 2003. The baristas balance the espresso with expertly steamed milk for an intense, rich cappuccino. It recently started offering single-origin coffee brewed by the cup.

228 Mott Street (Prince Street), NoLiTa, (212) 226-4011; 495 Lorimer Street (Powers Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (718) 388-7771; gimmecoffee.com.

GLASS SHOP A storefront kept attractively raw. There's a full lunch menu and flat whites — one of the owners is from Australia.

766 Classon Avenue (Sterling Place), Crown Heights, Brooklyn, (718) 450-8905, glassshoplocal.com.

GROUND SUPPORT It has the airy feeling of the art gallery that once occupied the space. Tourists and locals sit at rough wood tables and enjoy well-crafted espresso drinks, single-origin Chemex drip coffee, cold-brew iced coffee and a range of pastries and sandwiches.

399 West Broadway (Spring Street), SoHo, (212) 219-8722.

INDIAN ROAD CAFE & MARKET In a part of Manhattan that feels less like a metropolis than a quiet Hudson Valley hamlet, the macchiato is solid, and a nominal market has a good selection of beans from [Counter Culture Coffee](#).

600 West 218th Street (Indian Road), Inwood, (212) 942-7451, indianroadcafe.com.

IRIS CAFE Hidden in one of the prettiest corners of Brooklyn Heights, Iris Cafe has a simple menu (fresh sticky buns are a must) and a serious coffee bar. The macchiato can be great.

20 Columbia Place (Joralemon Street), Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn, (718) 722-7395.

JOE Joe reinvented itself last year: it started buying beans from Ecco Caffé, a highly regarded roaster; it retrained its staff; and it streamlined its locations, giving extra space to upgraded coffee gear. You can taste the difference. The macchiato is a work of art, and in the late morning when the crowds die down, some branches offer pour-overs, with single-origin beans. Last year, a Joe opened on the Upper West Side, bringing serious coffee to an underserved neighborhood.

141 Waverly Place (Sixth Avenue), Greenwich Village, (212) 924-6750; 9 East 13th Street (University Place), Greenwich Village, (212) 924-7400; 405 West 23rd Street (Ninth Avenue), Chelsea, (212) 206-0669; 89 East 42nd Street ([Grand Central Terminal](#)), (212) 661-8580; 514 Columbus Avenue (West 85th Street), Upper West Side, (212) 875-0100; joetheartofcoffee.com.

KAFFE 1668 In some ways, Kaffe 1668 is a neighborhood cafe; in other ways, it's an orthodox coffee bar. For New Yorkers on the run, there are lattes in paper cups and jumbo [cookies](#). But for the obsessed, there is drip coffee from a Clover machine, or seasonal single-origin espresso, which the baristas refuse to serve in a cappuccino because the milk would mask the flavor.

275 Greenwich Street (Warren Street), TriBeCa, (212) 693-3750, kaffe1668.com.

MAIALINO This Roman-style restaurant turns coffee into a ritual: during the morning, a pour-over drip bar is set up in a sunny area up front.

In the Gramercy Park Hotel, 2 Lexington Avenue (East 21st Street), Gramercy [Park](#), (212) 777-2410, maialinonyc.com.

MOOMAH CAFÉ An arts and crafts center for stylish TriBeCa children where the coffee is as good as at any of the hip spots in Williamsburg and Greenpoint. Stroller parking out front.

161 Hudson Street (Laight Street), TriBeCa, (212) 226-0345, moomah.com.

NINTH STREET ESPRESSO Each Ninth Street Espresso feels different, and yet the harried shoppers at the Chelsea Market, the parents with strollers across from Tompkins Square Park and the laptop crowd at the original Ninth Street location all enjoy uniformly excellent coffee. Last spring, the owner, Ken Nye, did the next best thing to roasting his own beans by creating the Alphabet City Blend with Intelligentsia Coffee and Tea. It's good in a cappuccino, great in a macchiato and exquisite in an espresso — which is only available to stay.

700 East Ninth Street (Avenue C), East Village, (212) 358-9225; 341 East 10th Street (Avenue B), East Village, (212) 777-3508; in the Chelsea Market, 75 Ninth Avenue (West 15 Street), (212) 228-2930; ninthstreetespresso.com.

OST CAFE Excellent coffee, including a fine cappuccino. Most people here seem to nurse their drinks, a tacit rent for the comfy chairs and WiFi.

441 East 12th Street (Avenue A), (212) 477-5600, ostcafenyc.com.

PRIME MEATS The restaurant still isn't fully open, but its the restaurant's coffee bar is running at full steam, with beans from Stumptown Coffee Roasters and gorgeous German-accented pastries baked downstairs. It turns out a pretzel with butter and sea salt that goes nicely with a macchiato.

465 Court Street (Luquer Street), Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, (718) 254-0327, frankspm.com.

SATURDAYS SURF If you're going to open an upscale surf shop in SoHo, why not turn the front into a coffee bar? The baristas are so good you don't mind the paper cups — which are easier to carry to the deck in back anyway.

31 Crosby Street (Grand Street), SoHo, (212) 966-7875.

THE SMILE This stylish, dimly lighted basement restaurant has a vintage Faema from 1963 (not the reissue), regarded as the first modern espresso machine. But even if you don't care about the mechanics

you can appreciate the aesthetics — the dials look as if they're from a Fiat Spider. And everybody can appreciate the plummy espressos.

26 Bond Street (the Bowery), NoHo, (646) 329-5836, thesmilenyc.com.

SOUTHSIDE COFFEE This friendly, bare-bones coffee bar opened in 2009 and is already a neighborhood fixture. The chairs out front fill up when the weather is nice.

652 Sixth Avenue (19th Street), Park Slope, Brooklyn, (347) 599-0887.

STUMPTOWN COFFEE ROASTERS With its travertine floors, walnut bar and natty staff, this is a striking setting for a cappuccino. The drink is up to the surroundings. Cold-brewed iced coffee tastes as bright and fruity as berries steeped in water, while a shot of espresso is so sweet and plush you'll wish it lasted longer. Starting at \$3.70, the mocha, made with Mast Brothers Chocolate, is one of New York's most reasonably priced luxuries.

18 West 29th Street (Broadway), no telephone, stumptowncoffee.com.

SWEET LEAF This wedge of a coffee bar sits at a traffic-clogged crossroads in Long Island City, though once you're inside the airy room, it feels like a sanctuary. The baristas know coffee, and there's an excellent selection of whole beans from Stumptown Coffee Roasters. Pastries are baked fresh all day.

10-93 Jackson Avenue (49th Avenue), Long Island City, Queens, (917) 832-6726, sweetleaflic.com.

THIRD RAIL COFFEE Third Rail Coffee punches above its weight. It's one of the city's smallest coffee bars, and its most focused. The owners, Humberto Ricardo and Rita McCaffrey, offer at least two different espresso blends (each needs its own grinder, a commitment of capital and counter space), single-origin coffee in a Chemex and a full range of espresso drinks. The cortado is memorable.

240 Sullivan Street (West Third Street), Greenwich Village, no telephone, thirdrailcoffee.com.

VARIETY COFFEE AND TEA Both locations of Variety Coffee and Tea look a little ramshackle — mismatched furniture, stacks of fliers by the door — but the baristas are professionals, and serve coffee with an endearing formality more in keeping with Milan and Rome than Williamsburg and Greenpoint. Just as important, the staff is highly skilled, and they serve as artful a cappuccino as you'll find in New York.

368 Graham Avenue (Conselyea Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (347) 599-2351; 145 Driggs Avenue (Russell Street), Greenpoint, Brooklyn, (347) 689-3790, varietynyc.com.