
INDIGENOUS INDUSTRY

BY TOM GRACE

JAVA GENERATIONS

Brooklynites refresh the coffee trade.



On Plymouth Street beneath the Manhattan Bridge lie the remains of Arbuckle Brothers' coffee roasting operations. The wholesaler created American coffee's first coast-to-coast standards on the wharves of what is now DUMBO.

Prior to the Civil War, everyone purchased their coffee green, and roasted (or burned) the beans themselves. In 1868, John Arbuckle patented a revolutionary process that would forever change the industry: roasting beans at the plant and coating them in an egg-and-sugar glaze. Its lasting flavor ideal for the wagon train, the company's Ariosa blend became known as cowboy coffee.

Arbuckle also industrialized coffee packing. While competitors still bagged by hand or sold in bulk to grocers, Arbuckle's machine put roasted, coated beans into ready-to-sell packages of consistent weight and size. By the 1890s, the Brooklyn-based business dominated the

nation's coffee trade.

Gillies Coffee, established in 1840, also has its roots in the New York coffee trade that thrived along both sides of the East River waterfront. The firm moved to Sunset Park from Manhattan in 1992. Of that skinny island across the river, Schoenholt, who runs Gillies with partner Hy Chabbott and their sons, shrugs. "The city wants to be a show place. Soon the only blue-collar people you'll see will be the ones serving you." But he's optimistic about prospects here. "Every generation manages to recreate the coffee house."

He ought to know. Schoenholt helped launch the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) in the '80s. By raising standards for growing, roasting and brewing coffee, the SCAA cultivated the quality discipline that defines today's high-end coffee scene. Schoenholt recalls the 1970s' java renaissance, "All of us were trying to bring the

trade out of the instant-coffee funk and turn people onto good coffee again.”

A century after Arbuckle, it was another Brooklynite who did just that, albeit controversially and across the continent. Brooklyn’s own Howard Schultz, who grew up in the Canarsie housing projects and graduated from Canarsie High, is the man credited/blamed for the creation of the Starbucks phenomenon. In 1982 he took a job at the then-decade-old Seattle-based coffee roaster. By 1987, the company had grown to 17 espresso bars; today Schultz remains chairman of the international juggernaut, which brings \$4 lattes to the masses in 12,440 locations worldwide, including a dozen storefronts right here in his hometown.

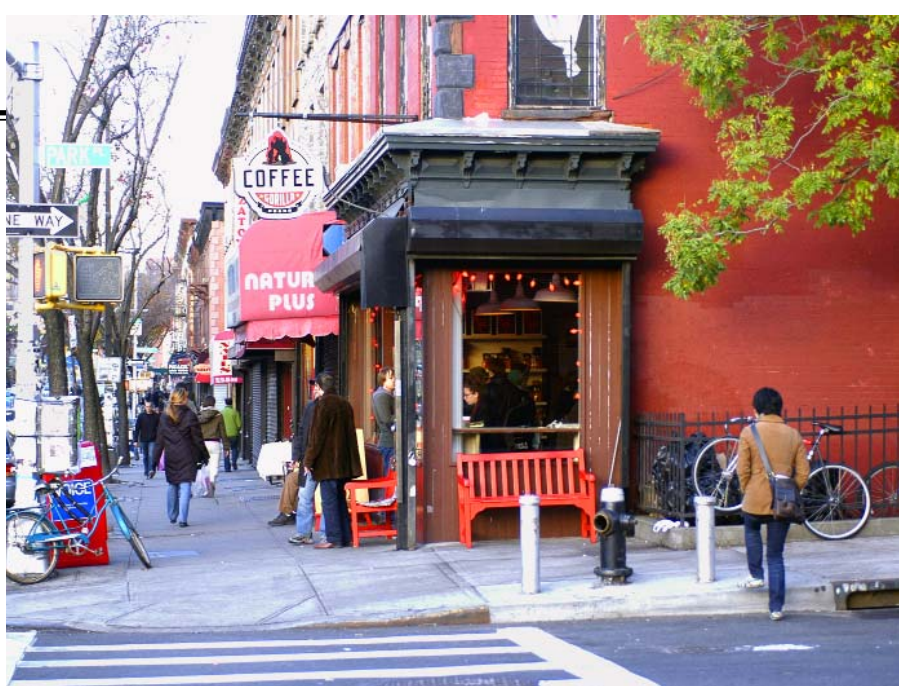
Today, a new generation of Brooklynites is at it again. But this reinvention of the coffee experience isn’t about processed industrialization or mall-friendly conspicuous consumption. By reinterpreting the traditionally faceless, interchangeable commodity using the playbook of cheesemongers and winemakers, the borough’s cutting edge roasters and cafés are ushering in the what industry geeks call the third wave: the era of artisanal coffee, complete with its own varietals, vintages, county-of-origin labels, and fruit notes.

A 16-year coffee veteran, J.D. Merget got his start as a Starbucks delivery driver in Seattle, moved to New York to work for an importer-roaster training restaurants on espresso service, and now owns two **Oslo Coffee** locations in Williamsburg. When asked if he worries about the chain competition, 12 Starbucks and 89 Dunkin’ Donuts in the borough, Merget shakes his head: “In Manhattan, convenience always has the upper hand. The beauty of Brooklyn is that people take pride in place and get behind you.”

Merget thinks it is no coincidence that so many of the artisanal coffee upstarts are making a home in Brooklyn, because we’re a population in touch with our taste buds. “It makes sense people here would care about coffee. The people who supply the city with its food have traditionally lived in Brooklyn. The factories and warehouses were here. Think how many cooks and chefs live in Brooklyn today.”

Merget acknowledges that artisanal coffee can be an acquired taste. Many roasters argue that the dark roasts popularized by chains hide flavor nuances, allowing flavor imperfections of lesser quality beans. Third wave believers prefer medium roasts (Merget compares the industry’s dominant “burnt” style to overly oaked wines) and often dismiss blends. “If coffee is wine, most blends are sangria,” he explains. Rather than that smoky signature which turns sickly sweet as the coffee cools, he promotes a more varied palate, and the flavors that come from different beans and roasts. He has parked three

Opposite: Gorilla Coffee roaster Carol McLaughlin inspects beans. **Above, from top:** Gorilla’s Park Slope cafe on 5th Avenue; a sunny afternoon inside the Red Horse Café in Park Slope; Carol McLaughlin and Darleen Scherer cup the latest batch. **Next page:** Freshly brewed latte art at the Red Horse Café.





different grinders on the counter so customers can experience the complete spectrum.

Greenpoint's **Café Grumpy** also embraces the role of curator. Their tasting notes read, "Kenya—Karimikui Farmer's Society; auction lot #758—Red fruits dominate this cup: cranberry, cherry and hibiscus." This emphasis on raw ingredients and the people who grow them is third-wave gospel. Owner Caroline Bell explains, "The aim is to reward the farmers for what they achieve in the field."

That's a tall order. Green coffee beans rank second only to petroleum as the world's most traded commodity, and Americans drink nearly 21

million 60-kilo bags of coffee a year, most of it known to them bluntly as "regular." Making space for artisanal distinctions in such a vast market requires a shift in the way people think about coffee from the field to the cup.

That shift can be tricky. Take Fair Trade certification for example. The Fair Trade coalition monitors business, farming and labor practices at participating coffee-growing cooperatives, and their label guarantees ecological methods and a competitive price paid to farmers. But, like the organic label, Fair Trade certification does not consider taste, and of course there are many small farms and cooperatives that don't participate in the program. So like restaurateurs who cultivate first-name relationships with farmers whose heritage pork or heirloom apples might not bear the o-word, many small coffee houses instead focus on traceability and say they source from a small set of trusted suppliers, albeit a world away. Critics say such vague claims, usually punctuated with "we pay the farmer directly," lack Fair Trade certification's transparent accountability.

"We don't expect people to be educated about all the issues," says Darleen Scherer, founder of Park Slope's **Gorilla Coffee**, "If we do our job, people should taste the difference." At Gorilla's Sunset Park roasting facility, the jute bags filled with coffee beans are piled to one side of the room and the red Idaho-made Diedrich Roaster is on the other. Gorilla remains committed to Fair Trade, roasting over 100,000 pounds of beans each year.

D'Amico Foods in Cobble Hill has been roasting on Court Street since 1948 and they still make deliveries to the retired longshoremen who were their first regulars. They survived instant coffee, are riding out the age of the Frappuccino, and expect to thrive in the artisanal era.

Lifelong Cobble Hill resident Chris Modica, 31, mans the espresso bar in the back of the shop. He's been serving coffee there since he was 13, and now roasts it, too. "When I travel, I like to live like a local," he says, explaining how he learned to love cappuccino on a trip to Rome in 2000. A Brooklyn buddy turned expatriate tour guide introduced him to a barista in Rome's Trastevere neighborhood. She brought Modica behind the bar, indoctrinating him to the joys of the short ristretto-style shot, less bitter than the typical espresso in the States. "Now," he says, "I never pull a long shot unless a customer asks for it."

Modica sees big potential in the business and in his corner of Brooklyn. When he's not pulling shots, he's studying the latest issue of *Wine Spectator*.

Court Street, get ready for the java sommelier. □

GET YOUR FIX

ESPRESSO BARS

Café Grumpy
193 Meserole Avenue, Greenpoint, 718-349-7623, cafegrumpy.com
Team Grumpy delivers the full artisan treatment. Check out their Web site for the latest roster from roasters Ecco Café and Counter Culture.

Red Horse Café
497 6th Avenue, Park Slope,
718-499-4973, redhorsecafe.com
This haven for freelancers features boutique beans from Barrington Coffee Roasting Company, which also supplies Joe the Art of Coffee in Manhattan.

Café Regular
318a 11th Street, Park Slope,
646-522-6436
Martin O'Connell takes a no-fuss approach with beans from Philadelphia-based La Colombe Torrefaction. While you wait in line (worth it), ponder the face of Jean-Paul Sartre tagged on the sidewalk outside.

Oslo Coffee
328 Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg
133-B Roebling Street, Williamsburg,
718-782-0332, oslocoffee.com
Owner J.D. Merget is a medium-roast

evangelist. The Roebling location is perfect for a mug and the morning paper. Look for Oslo to emerge from the permitting process this spring and start roasting right in the store.

ROASTER-RETAILERS

D'Amico Foods
311 Court Street, Cobble Hill,
718-875-5403, damicofoods.com
D'Amico's dark roast Red Hook blend is a neighborhood favorite. Foodies running late can pick up their coffee around the corner at Stinky Bklyn on Smith Street.

Gorilla Coffee
97 5th Avenue, Park Slope,
718-230-3243, gorillacoffee.com
Gorilla favors a dark roast style and roasts only Fair Trade and Organic certified beans. You can also find Gorilla beans in your NY-area Whole Foods.

Gimme! Coffee
495 Lorimer Street, Williamsburg,
718-388-7771, gimmecoffee.com
Gimme! roasted 150,000 pounds of coffee in Ithaca this year. One of the more popular blends, Deep Disco features beans from the Malinal Co-op in Mexico. Ask artisan barista Michael White about his upcoming tour of their farms.