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Devil's Brew

We're serious about our morning cup here.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Pour-over coffee is a science at Speckled Ax on Congress Street.

WELCOME TO PORTLAND, home of artisanal everything. We don't just do, we do it up. We have tasting rooms for local beer and kombucha, our restaurants source local food and create craft-cocktail menus, our bakeries offer loaves from grains grown and milled in Maine.

Why should **coffee shops** be any different? It would be nuts to get in a rut drink-

HUNGRY EYE



From left: Alex Spear checks the progress of the roasting beans at **CBD**; a pour-over is carefully prepared at **Bard, Arabica** on Free Street opened its doors to coffee lovers in 1995.

ing the same cup every day. By sipping around town, you can fall in love with coffee all over again.

TO DRIP, PERCHANCE TO BREW

For a cool, clean vibe with sleek furnishings, it's easy to like **Bard Coffee** at 185 Middle Street. Wicked Joe Coffee, the Topsham-based company that sells wholesale organic and fair-trade beans nationally, owns this Old Port shop and roasts its custom beans.

Menus run to both brewed and "poured-

over" hot coffee drinks. An 8-ounce cup of brewed dark roast is \$2.50 (I stuck to plain black coffee everywhere, for the sake of comparison). It's utterly delicious with a deep, black espresso-like tang but no burnt bitterness. There are pastries from the Baker's Bench in Westbrook and Kamasoupra soups at lunchtime.

Poured-over is serious here, and it's not cheap. A 12-ounce cup is \$3.50. What's the appeal? "You're going to really taste the bean," says a barista at the pour-over sta-

tion. She recommends a Guatemalan bean called Antonio Domingo. "That's the farmer who grew the beans."

Poured-over is also slow. She scoops Antonio's beans, grinds them, and puts them into a cone filter over a glass Chemex beaker on a tiny warming plate. She pours hot water in gradual increments over the beans. A good five or six minutes have elapsed since we started talking. Anyone in a hurry would have to plan ahead.

"People who like coffee this way think it's the only way," she says.

COFFEE TOWN, ME

tasty, organic Carpe Diem coffee blends. At 722 Congress Street, **Yordprom** coffee, roasted in Topsham, is delicious. **Belleville**, the French bakery on Munjoy Hill with various and glorious croissants, serves Tandem's Time & Temperature roast.

Off the peninsula, **The Proper Cup** just opened in February at 500 Forest Avenue. With industrial black walls and salvaged-wood counters lined with metal stools, it's poised for neighborhood and student hoards. "Our coffees are from Flight Coffee Company in Bedford, New Hampshire," says Proper Cup co-owner Rachel Kriei. "They try to bring out the natural flavor of the beans, so no super-dark roasts." Sip a 12-ounce cup of rich Brazilian medium roast (\$2.41) and a HiFi donut and check out the crazy chandelier light sculpture fashioned from plumbing pipes and filament bulbs. A motorcycle is mounted on a table in the middle of the huge room. "It's spending its retirement here," says Kriei.

A few blocks up Forest at 643, **Little Woodfords** is serving Vivid Coffee from Winooski, Vermont. "We've got single-origin drips, and espresso," says Andrew Zarro, one of the owners. "Mill Cove Baking at FORK Food Lab makes us great scones and cakes and amazing pop-tarts."

Before I even ask, he answers the inevitable Woodfords Corner question. "You can park on the street right out front—we're on the outbound side."

You don't have to look far for a good cup of coffee. In the West End, **Aurora Provisions** offers



Tandem offers coffee tasting at its roastery on Anderson Street.



What if you don't feel the magic? Where the brewed cup was rich and full-bodied, this slow-pour tastes weaker, a bit sour and fruity. But it tastes quite good when it's come to room temperature. Caitlin Sackville, who's been making coffee at Bard for more than four years, explains.

"Coffee's like wine or food. Your palate can discern more nuance when it's closer to room temperature. When we introduce people to the pour-over style, we emphasize that it's not any better, it's just a different method. We use medium and lighter roasts, and the bean batches are often small—too small to use for the [higher volume] brewed method."

"The extra labor, and the fact that small batches can cost more, is reflected in the higher price. Back when I was just a customer, I always drank brewed dark roasts. Once I got interested in the characteristics of say, Costa Rican beans, I got to really appreciate the pour-over," But, that said, "I like either one, and I drink them both."

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HUNGRY EYE

BAKERY SORCERY

As soon as you get in line at **Tandem Coffee** at 242 Congress Street, you'll realize you're not leaving without one of baker Briana Holt's divine pastries. By the time I'm handed my 10-ounce cup of drip-brewed Ethiopian (\$2.75), I've chosen the blood-orange scone (\$3.50).

You are a good person, reads the sans-serif type wrapped around the paper cup. Nice to know. The double-o's of *good* are the wheels of the shop's signature tandem bike logo. The coffee's good, if a bit weak—but that's just me—and the flavor improves as it cools. The scone is a masterpiece.

"It's not the brew method, it's the roasting," says Tandem co-owner Will Pratt later on the phone from his roastery on Anderson Street. That subtly fruity quality of the coffee? "Coffee should taste fruity. It's a fruit. If you're just roasting darker, you're just tasting carbon. I love talking about this—we do tastings at the shop on Anderson Street," which he recommends to discover the variety and nuance among light-roasted beans.

BOHEMIAN BEANS

Arabica's big café/roastery at 9 Commercial Street is a casual Central Perk kind of hangout with a sofa and easy chairs, a crackling fire on chilly mornings, and plenty of table and bar seating. There's a raffish, industrial-warehouse charm, with brick walls, high ceilings, and a big roasting area way at the back. The original Arabica at 2 Free Street is equally boho, if smaller.



"All our coffee is brewed in a drip machine," the barista says. My 12-ounce cup of French roast is \$2.45. No pour-over here. "Pour-over is a whole other theory of making coffee," he says. "You pour a little water, you wait, you pour more. It's supposed

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to make a better cup of coffee, but one cup takes like five minutes to make. *I could never.*" He rolls his eyes. "But that's just me."

Arabica serves a café's worth of breakfast and lunch food, from Baker's Bench pastries, to house-made bagels, to panini and quiche. Buttered raisin toast for \$2.50 is the perfect tiny treat.

ORIGINAL GOOD GUYS

Coffee By Design can take credit for turning Portland into a serious coffee town. They showed up on Congress Street in 1994 before there even was an Arts District. From the outset, CBD committed to ethically grown beans at a shop that developed into a little empire with a reputation for coffee, responsible business practices, and supporting local artists and local causes.

CBD is known for its consistency and for such popular house blends as Midnight Jazz, Black & Tan, and Alonzo Double Dark. Baker's Bench pastries and Holy Donuts are among the many treats offered. A 12-ounce cup of drip-brewed is \$2.54.

"I feel like a lot of people don't realize we also offer single-cup drip," says Rosie Borden at CBD's café/roastery at 1 Diamond Street in East Bayside. (Not all the smaller CBD shops have the option yet.) The 12-ounce single-cup is \$3.51. "It's worth it—it's a good, clean cup. I like light and medium roasts for this. They have more flavor notes—fruitiness, nuttiness, citrus—than dark roasts. But really, it's a preference thing, a taste thing."

At CBD on Congress Street, a barista notes that "even Starbucks has pour-over now. First it was cold-brew [the now-standard method for cold coffee drinks], and now it's pour-over. I guess it's the 'in' thing."

You'll find Coffee By Design coffee everywhere from the **Hillside Coffee Shop** and **Katie Made** bakery on Munjoy Hill to Coffee Me Up on Cumberland Avenue in Bayside to the **Otherside Delis** on Veranda and Vaughan streets, to name a few.

WOOD-FIRED

Matt Bolinger opened the **Speckled Ax** coffee shop at 567 Congress Street (pictured left) six years ago. He roasts his beans in South Portland in a wood-fueled roaster. The shop's an oasis from the noise and nuttiness outside, with chocolate-brown walls and mellow music.

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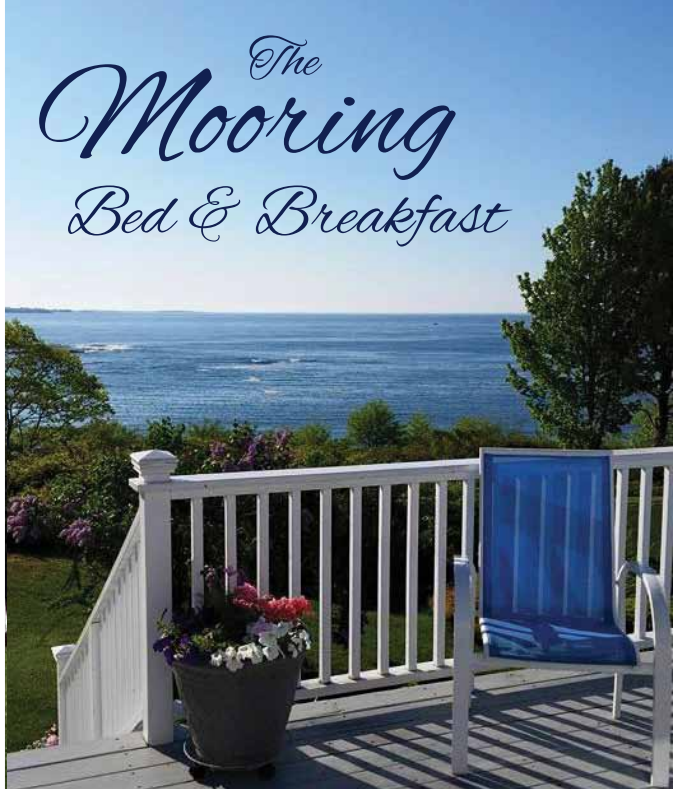
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HUNGRY EYE

“We serve brewed coffee until 11 a.m.” as a concession to people hurrying to work, presumably, “and after that it’s all pour-over,” says barista Terrence Wolfe. The 10-ounce pour-over is \$3.25; the beans tend to medium and lighter roasts. The snacks are quite choice. “We get our food from a number of sources—some pastries are from Standard Baking and Little Bigs, and the cookies are from Night Moves. I pretty much have to have one every day.”

At Higher Grounds on Wharf Street, Speckled Ax coffee is drip-brewed. “We opened in October,” says the server as he hands me a 12-ounce mocha java (\$2.75). It’s quite good, and the flavor expands as it cools.

It says something about Portland that all these thriving and very local, often organic, and fair-trade shops coexist peacefully with Starbucks. You may eschew the corporate giant in favor of the local, but somebody must be drinking the stuff from Seattle, since there are eight Starbucks outlets in and around the city. ■



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