

# In search *of the* perfect espresso





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ESPRESSO BARS ABOUND IN NEW YORK (THOUGH THE TRADITIONAL ITALIAN ESPRESSO IS STILL A RARITY) AND RUN THE GAMUT FROM THOSE MANAGED BY ITALIANS TO THOSE OWNED BY REFUGEES FROM SEATTLE. IF YOU THOUGHT THE DECISION BY STARBUCKS TO SHUTTER 600 SHOPS WAS A SIGN THAT THE ESPRESSO CULTURE IS FADING, READ ON

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*by Susannah Gold*  
photos by John Morgan

**T**o much clamor, Starbucks announced earlier this year that it was going to close about 600 shops as it sought to boost profitability. Some consumers complained that their local shop had been cut while others cheered what they said was a sign independent espresso bars would have more space to carve out a slice of the rich market. The official list says Manhattan will lose six stores, and the outer boroughs several more, by the end of next year as Starbucks pays the price of overexpanding. But at the same time many independent espresso bars from the Atlantic to the Pacific are thriving and expanding. This could be good news for the American consumer in search of that perfect espresso, the one that makes you come back for more the next day.

Italians, who know something about espresso, agree on very few things, but the uniformity of their view on New York's espresso scene is remarkable. Alberto Paderi, a partner in Alta Cucina Society, an epicurean society founded to explore, share and celebrate premium-quality Italian food and wine products, summed it up in a recent conversation, "Italians all go to Sant Ambroeus, Via Quadronno, Tarallucci e Vino and Buon Vino."

Paderi, who has a long history with coffee and food products in the U.S., found wholehearted agreement from his partner Amedeo Angiolillo. But there are also a lot of non-Italians, including Accademia di Vino chef Kevin Garcia, who cite those same spots.

So are these the only decent espresso bars in town? Not by a long shot. On last count there were more than 30 espresso bars in New York City and many are worth a visit.

While the Italians may prefer only a few spots, the rest of the city's coffee drinkers have decided to embrace espresso-based drinks – cappuccino, espresso, latte, mocha and café au lait – offered at a variety of locations. Espresso sales in the food services industry grew 21 percent, cappuccino 16 percent and lattes 15 percent from 2002 to 2007 in foodservice channels, according to research by consultancy Datamonitor.



Some industry observers had worried that the growing coffee culture would be stymied by the Starbucks closures, but the owners of the espresso bars mentioned below viewed the closings as a non-issue and said the move by the coffee giant was not a reflection on the viability of the smaller bars.

Many of the bars have plans to expand in the coming months or have just recently opened a new branch.

Additionally, many coffee roasters have announced plans to open stores in New York City in the coming year. Espresso bars, it seems, have become a permanent fixture on the scene in the Big Apple to the joy of many coffee-dependent New Yorkers.

We made the rounds of a number of espresso bars to discover that there is indeed a significant difference in the taste of the coffee and in the ambience in the different bars.

The places can be divided into three distinct groups: espresso bars run by Italians or with an Italian barista; espresso bars run by non-Americans from countries with a strong café and coffee culture; and espresso bars run by Americans, often from Seattle, the U.S. coffee heaven.

Following in the footsteps of the successful Starbucks model, the bars in this last group tend to be larger and there is usually more room to sit and use your computer.

Most use beans from U.S. roasters and are socially active. Espresso making is taken very seriously as is the making of designs with milk (American baristas speak of latte art though Italians, who are just as skillful in this art form, do not use the term).

## NESPRESSO ESPRESSO

**Nespresso, owned by Swiss multinational Nestle,** has begun to penetrate the U.S. market with its chic espresso maker and requisite coffee capsules. The Madison Avenue store is a temple dedicated to this expensive Swiss machine. Nespresso also has two coffee bars in Manhattan (761 Madison Avenue and in Bloomingdales at 54 Broadway) where you can have an espresso and a bite to eat.

A recent visit to the Madison Avenue store found some Italian tourists pleased that the espresso was as it should be, and that the air conditioning was moderate, but they were astounded by the prices.

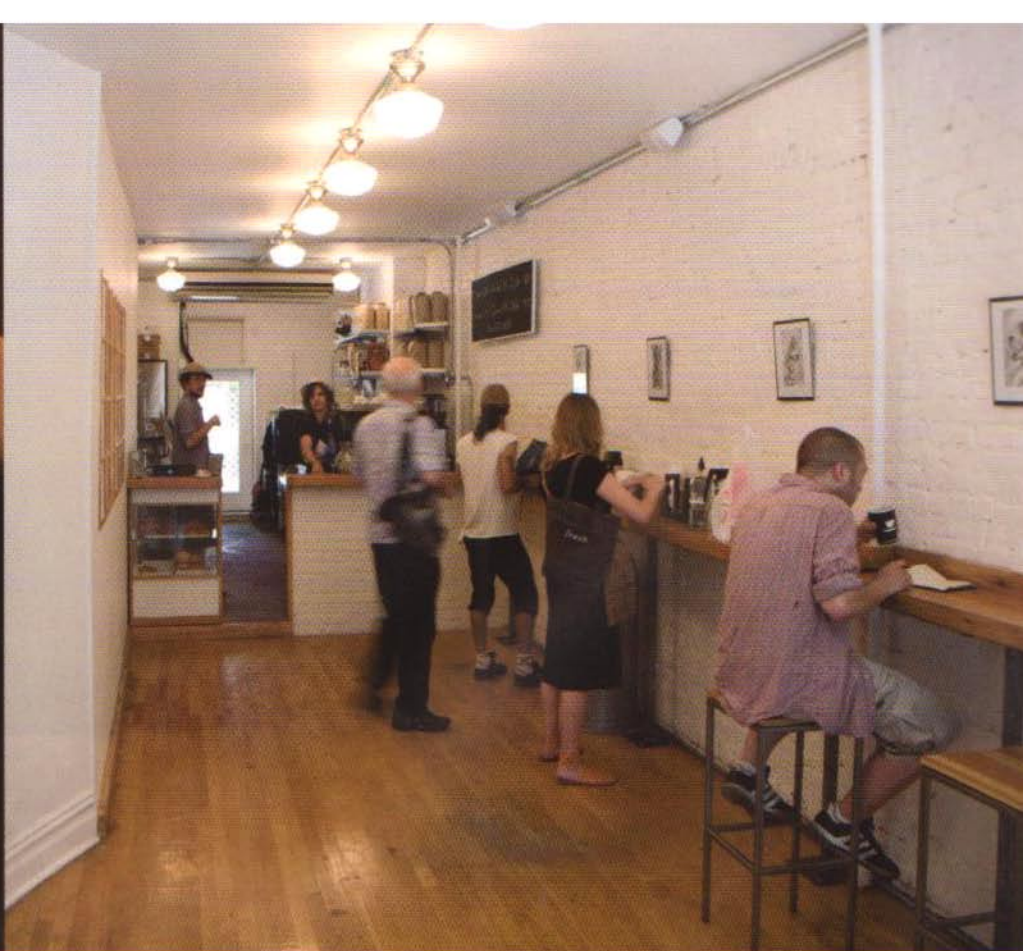
## ESPRESSO BARS OWNED AND RUN BY ITALIANS

### *Sant Ambroeus*

- ▶ 1000 Madison Avenue
- ▶ 259 West 4th Street
- ▶ 30 Main Street in Southampton, New York

Perhaps the most famous espresso bar in New York is Sant Ambroeus. Hans Pauli bought the Milanese pastry shop of the same name in 1960 and in 1982 he decided to seek his fortune in the U.S. and opened the Madison Avenue bar. It was an immediate hit. In the 1990s, Parisian gourmet shop Fauchon bought the Madison Avenue Sant Ambroeus and Mr. Pauli Senior retired to oversee his South Hampton bar of the same name. His son Dimitri opened Sant Ambroeus in the West Village a few years ago and it too became a hit with a chic downtown crowd.

When Fauchon decided to sell their Madison Avenue store in 2005, Sant Ambroeus came back to the joy of the locals. Sant Ambroeus is much more than an espresso bar, but the place is renowned for the quality of the coffee. They use Lavazza Blue at all three locations.



**“There are more than 30 independent espresso bars in Manhattan and more are on the way even as Starbucks closes 600 shops across the U.S.”**

***Via Quadronno***

- ▶ 23 East 73rd Street
- ▶ 767 Fifth Avenue

With two locations in Manhattan and one in White Plains north of New York, Via Quadronno has now opened its doors in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Coral Gables, Florida. This franchise is part of the same group that owns Bottega del Vino, the famed restaurant in Verona. Severino Barzan and his partner Gianni Pascucci have been wildly successful in the tough U.S. restaurant market. Via Quadronno on East 73rd Street has the feel of a nice neighborhood restaurant. On a recent trip a customer confided that she had been there four different times that day. Many people come for the coffee, others for the panini and desserts.

***Tarallucci e Vino***

- ▶ 15 East 18th Street
- ▶ 163 First Avenue

Another slice of Italy in New York can be found at the two locations of Tarallucci e Vino, a wine, food and espresso bar created by Pepi di Giacomo and Luca di Pietro, both of whom



hail from Italy's Abruzzo region. Di Giacomo through knowledge gained at Danesi and Di Pietro at Lavazza have made coffee and Italian coffee culture a fundamental part of the Tarallucci e Vino experience. Their two bars are packed from breakfast until after dinner. Some customers have their morning coffee at Tarallucci, come back for lunch and a then stop by a third time for a drink at the end of the day. They use Saccaria, a coffee from Ancona. The barista is Italian and the espresso is perfect.

***Buon Italia***

- ▶ Chelsea Market (75 9th Avenue)

Another stop on the Italian hit parade is Buon Italia, an importer of Italian food products and wholesale distributor to many Italian restaurants. They have a small café in the corner of the shop where some of New York's best espresso and gelato are served. This is not a chic Milanese coffee bar. It is your everyday espresso in Italy. The barista, Senait, is a young woman from Eritrea who was adopted by an Italian family. Her charm comes not only from the mean espresso she makes, but also from her thick accent from the town near Rome where she grew up. Miscela d'Oro is Buon Italia's coffee of choice.

**ESPRESSO BARS OWNED BY FOREIGNERS**  
*(though many have Italian baristas)*

***Zibetto Espresso Bar***

- ▶ 1385 6TH Avenue

This very small espresso bar in midtown is one of the few where you are forced to take your coffee away or drink it while standing. The bar is the brain child of Anastasio Nougos, a Swede

Via Quadronno, Fika and La Colombe, left to right. La Colombe, below, is planning to open a second espresso bar next year.

dedicated to making the perfect espresso. The white marble bar is packed with customers ordering a variety of coffees, Sanbitter and panini. The barista is from Salerno and smiled when asked about the beautiful heart he had designed with the milk on the top of an espresso macchiato. "Serving espresso is a full time job and not just a hobby or something you can learn quickly," he said. "You need to get a feel for it." Nougos plans to open another bar in the city. Zibetto uses coffee from Danesi.

### *Fika*

► 41 West 58th Street

Upscale Fika is located one block away from the Plaza Hotel and not too far from Zibetto. It is owned by Lars Akerlund, also a Swede. Fika serves small plates of Swedish foods such as gravlax and many sweet cakes and buns. The coffee, Löfbergs Lila, comes directly from Sweden, specifically from Karlstadt. The prices are in line with those at other espresso bars, but the ethos is a bit different.

The clientele seems to be women from the Upper East Side out for lunch. The coffee is a bit lighter in color than most other espressos and is very good. The Swedes drink more coffee per capita than any other people, the Swedish barista informs me. Fika – which means coffee break in Swedish – intends to open a second location soon.

### *Aroma*

► 145 Greene Street (entrance on West Houston)

Swedes are not the only foreigners making waves with espresso bars in New York City. Aroma is a 12-year-old Israeli franchise



from Jerusalem with a hopping coffee bar in SoHo. The owners plan to open a second location soon somewhere on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Aroma uses a mix of South African coffee that is then given a private Aroma label, says Irit Elisha, the store manager.

The coffee is good and the ambience in the red-tiled bar is friendly, so much so that from noon to 3 p.m. Aroma turns off its Wi-Fi connection because the bar gets too crowded with patrons who buy an espresso and sit at their computers





all day writing emails and surfing the Internet. The bar is hip and caters to a younger crowd though the over-30 contingent is also well represented.

The menu is very eclectic and you will even find pastries flown in directly from Israel while other sweets hail from South America such as the Alfajores, cookies made with a dulce de leche filling. Irit says Aroma is the bar of choice in New York for Israelis, many of whom come to get a taste of home.

## LAVAZZA EXECUTIVE SEES GROWTH IN ESPRESSO MARKET

**“Espresso still hasn’t caught on in America,**

not in the traditional Italian way in any event,” says Ennio Ranaboldo, the chief executive of Lavazza USA. “What has happened is that espresso-based drinks have entered the main stream and that is thrilling. Thanks to the big players – McDonalds, Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts – many new consumers are approaching the world of espresso.

“There is room for everybody. Espresso’s growth is seen as a part of the specialty coffee industry which is booming in the U.S. Much attention is being paid to the origin and quality of the coffees as well as the trade practices employed by those who buy coffee. This has all come about in the last fifteen years.”

owned by a group of partners including founder Todd Carmichael and Frenchmen Jean Philippe Ibeti, the master roaster. Coffees come from all over the world and are then sold under the private label of La Colombe.

The owners are very socially active and part of the proceeds from one of their coffees, Afrique, goes to house and clothe orphans whose parents died of AIDS. They do direct trade with many farmers and are constantly searching to improve their brand.

Their coffees are a favorite of many chefs in the city including Alain Ducasse,

### *La Colombe*

► 319 Church Street

One coffee bar that many people pay attention to is La Colombe, located in TriBeCa, which was originally a roaster from Philadelphia and has been going strong since 1994.

While the New York shop only opened last year, La Colombe has been selling coffee in the New York market for ten years. The shop is mainly to give customers a chance to see how the coffee is made and to try it. The company is

**“Italians and Seattle immigrants are not the only people brewing excellent coffee in Manhattan, you will also find bars run by Israelis and Swedes”**

Jean George, Tom Colicchio, Daniel Boulud and Danny Meyer at the MOMA. La Colombe is also planning to expand in New York, opening a second branch early next year. Bethany, a barista and Drew Barrymore look-a-like, says employees from Italian Television Rai, located across the street, come for espresso every day.



The Art of Joe, left (photo by Rachel Levy), has four locations in Manhattan. Latte art at Via Quadronno, below.



## ESPRESSO BARS CREATED AND RUN BY AMERICANS

### *Joe, the Art of Coffee*

- ▶ 141 Waverly Place
- ▶ 9 East 13th Street
- ▶ 405 West 23rd Street
- ▶ Grand Central Terminal

Jonathan Rubenstein, owner of Joe, the Art of Coffee, started his coffee chain in 2002 and now has four Manhattan locations including two that opened this year. Joe is active in the community and has formed a running team as well. Joe features hand-roasted beans from Barrington Coffee Roasting Company, top-of-the-line \$14,000 La Marzocco espresso machines and highly trained baristas who inscribe their lattes with foam leaf patterns. He hosts classes such as "Espresso 101" and "Cupping," a coffee-sampling technique used by professional tasters. A number of the baristas have worked in Seattle coffee bars, a source of pride for the Joe team.

### *Gimme! Coffee*

- ▶ 288 Mott Street
- ▶ 495 Lorimer St, Brooklyn

This coffee company was started in Ithaca, New York in 2000 and like Joe, they take their coffee very seriously. Philanthropy and activism are a big part of the mission of this coffee bar, but that doesn't mean the quality of the espresso suffers. They sell oodles of their private label coffee called Leftist. Jennifer Bryant, the manager at this Nolita Espresso bar says staff training is a key part of the Gimme! philosophy. Each barista starts on the cash register before eventually being allowed to make the coffee. All are taught to do latte art. Gimme! also does biweekly cupping of different coffees for the staff in order to train their palates.

## ART IMITATING COFFEE

**Latte art is all the rage among many New York baristas.** Those beautiful leaf or heart designs

on top of your cappuccino are not just there for looks, they are actually a way for the barista to show that the milk has been properly steamed. Jennifer Bryant of Gimme! Coffee says that only with the right aeration can latte be made into beautiful designs. A number of American espresso bars recently had a Latte Art Throwdown to benefit the American Red Cross in its efforts to provide aid to Myanmar and China. Joe, the Art of Coffee on 13th Street hosted the event, called Rosettas for Relief. Sponsored by Joe, Ninth Street Espresso, Gimme! Coffee, Cafe Grumpy, and Gorilla Coffee, baristas competed in a head-to-head contest: one shot, one pour, no second chances. The winner was "Danger" Dan Griffin from El Beit in Brooklyn.

### *Ninth Street Espresso*

- ▶ 700 East 9th Street
  - ▶ 341 East 10th Street
  - ▶ In Chelsea Market (75 Ninth Avenue) 700 East 9th Street
- Started by Ken Nye, Ninth Street Espresso has three locations. The baristas at the bar in Chelsea Market underline that they use Stumptown Coffee, a famed roaster from Portland, Oregon. Some people swear by this espresso bar. A customer from Venezuela said he liked their coffee and felt like he was at home, no small feat for a Venezuelan coffee drinker in New York.

Ken Nye sees himself as a hybrid of the Italian and American traditions. "Ernesto Illy's writings on the science of coffee were the strongest influence on me when I was starting out," says Nye. Unlike some of the other coffee bars, Ninth just offers coffee, no food or wine.

"We have a single purpose," Nye continues. "Our stores aren't fancy. We don't use syrups or big sizes. Our approach is progressive and cutting edge. I may be the only true New Yorker who owns an espresso bar. We have no real connection to Seattle although I greatly respect what they have done for the American coffee scene."