

Needin' a Java and Ain't No Place to Go?

A Master Roaster Checks Out the Williamsburg Coffee Scene

by John Gant

I'm comin' in here from Upstate, want coffee, ya know, and I wanna hit on the hipster coffeehaus scene in W'burg, but just now I'm lookin' out the door wonderin' – what if there ain't no place to go? Wonderin' – what if the coffee culture thing isn't here at all?

Or if we're stuck with the S-monoculture yet: Starbuck's. So, I gotta get out there and patronize, scout, and let'cha know what's up espresso-wise.

I hear you're asking, "So why is this guy from outta the neighborhood gonna let me know what's up with coffee where I live? Why read this at all?" Well, I say I'm a coffee guy, a sipping addict, a roaster, actually "Master Roaster" (go see at masterroaster.com), a "cupper" for the trade; I writes coffee stuff; I talks coffee stuff. Me, that's about all I do, coffee. Or, if at this point you gotta have some credentials: hey, I'm a member of the Roasters' Guild of the Specialty Coffee Association of America and of the Scientific Wing of the Specialty Coffee Institute, an espresso and brew certified tech, a certified espresso lab tech and barista trainer. I have been pulling shots and roasting coffee for an awful long time.

Here's what's worth checking when you're out there doing your best to find the golden shot, the primo cappuccino.

coffee, the shot: *it's the blend, miscela, that makes the difference, the best at light blend, bright and dry to very acidic, aromatic, to the extreme of sharp and shallow without dimension; the best dark blend can be resonant with woodiness, nutty, creamy, with heavy, loamy aftertaste, to the worst that might be burned, fishy. Every espresso shot should have a thick, encapsulating layer, the crema, which provides a natural top for the aroma and a texture for the mouth. Ristretto: short, hoppin'. Lungo: long, lingering.*

la macchina espresso: *it takes money for a good one, new is not necessarily better, what counts is attention to pour time, to temperature (194 degrees F.), and to maintaining its workings and cleanliness. The pour is related to the quality of the blend, the fineness of the grind.*

il macinadosatore: *the grind has to be precise and consistent for the right pour at the right time. Right time is short at 18 seconds, long at 30 and those are the extreme limits. Pour is right if it wraps around the spout a bit, is bushy and honey red as il coda del volpe, the tale of the fox.*

barista: *the hand behind the bar has to know how to bring together the right dose (15 grams for a double shot), and the right grind, with the right tamp (30 to 70 pounds in the portafilter) to match the 9 to 12 atmospheres which is the right machine pressure for the right pour.*

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senza sciuma: *meaning without foam; this is a method of texturing the steamed milk in a way in which the sugars are brought out and the proteins are turned to a matrix of sorts, creamy and sweet, really sweet. From it, designer baristas can make arty floral tops on the espresso shots. Look for it rather than the phony, foamy mermaid stuff of the S-syndrome.*

So out the door, and here's the tour: a day and a half of W'burg wanderin' for espresso by the cup, by the cup, by the cup. . . .

Foist Ting in da Mornin', Bruno's, the Fortunato Bros.

It's in the mornin' and I'm givin' ya my routine routes. This don't mean these are the only mornin' places. Or that you gotta take it straight, as in *espresso solito*. But, whenever I'm here, these are mornin' places for me. Also my preference—the *doppio ristretto* shot in heavy ceramic cup, with saucer, little spoon at side, down in three staggering, shattering sips. . . then onward.

Here's around the corner from me, **Bruno's**. And, you could choose your cup with the textured stuff. I mean the sweet and gracious Grammy behind the counter at **Bruno's** bakery works each cappuccino carefully, with a moist, pearly peak, the "monk's cap".

I'm cruisin' the ultra pastry case, shelves of marzipan-, pear-, raspberry-, chocolate-glorified things. Walkin' in, this place grabs on to ya. Maybe like F. A. O. Schwartz grabs on to kids. Most of these items shouldn't be for breakfast, right? I haul away a huge croy-sant (hey, how do ya spell that?), so flaky. I mess it up-down my front, but anyway, I'm not doin' the 4-5-6 train to Wall Street right now. So, this is gen-u-wine, a cuppa, a croy-sant. But oops, here comes the shot in a *little paper cup*. Is this for meds or for coffee, I'm lookin' like. . .? Shot is long, pretty sharp, yet there is some texture and crema. Maybe there's mechanical stuff going bad, cause I saw the shot coming over the top of the portafilter when it was pullin'. As did my friend, the Grammy. But it could be she's got her own set of problems goin'.

Where I am now is the **Fortunato Bros.** on Devoe. Uh, comin' in here, you gotta kinda act like ya know what you're doin'. This too is at first thing in the mornin', remember.

There are only guys. They're gathered around me at the stand-up bar where you must make your way, for authenticity and with purpose. They're speaking around me, *sotto voce*, with the: "So, what's dis kid doin in here-ah?" This is hard 'cause I ain't a kid; I get *Modern Maturity* in my PO box.

I'm settin' my gaze on a real barista type. I don't hold eye contact too long, 'cause of the challenge thing. Behind him, and sitting straight on toward me, is the mother of espresso machines, a massive four-group, guarded by a couple of grinders, stuffed with bean bags marked "*Miscela*" the "blend". This is a good sign. Here coffee is *expressly for espresso*.

Because of the totality of the works in the **Fortunato Bros.**, this is where I wanna come for my double shot. The espresso has meaning even though the shots are a bit long for me. The heavy cups, the demi-spoons, the sugar mechanism on the counter

that opens and closes its cover for you're spoonin', the apricot-glazed croy-sants (again?), the counter buzza-buzza over the pastries, boxed and tied in white before you. Maybe heavenly, but how should I know. I ain't for sure been there yet.

Settlin' into the Afternoon on the Streets, Porkin' Plus the Diners

Then I'm movin' on to the afternoon, headin' into early evening cups. . . .

Oh, but maybe before that, I gotta plan out the rest of this whole event, so little time, so much to do. I start by scootin' around the corner for another double espresso at the **F' Bros**. Then down three, four blocks to the beer warehouse, 'cause it's building to be the blaster August day, past which I go to **Mario's**. Here is sweet Italian sausage. I mean, hand-ground, hand-stuffed, and this is just one of the four, maybe five pork shops in eastern W'burghood. Across the street, what says "Dairy and Delicatessen", is **Tedone's**, 75 years of smokin' mozzarella. I pack one out, reeking smoke, luring dogs and birds of prey down the street. I dodge into one of the bakeries nearby for a torpedo-shaped semolina with seeds, of course. I need this combo – sausage, bread, beer – for thinkin', for plannin' ahead. After a little cooking, cutting, squishing, off again.

Puttin' things in perspective, I gotta say this is as much a sausage nirvana as a coffee community. You got pork stores and pork stores. What with a name like **Pasquale and Antonietta's**, you can expect coils of fennel sweets, glistening in their leisure. **Emily's**, I think it is, north on Graham, has got plump links, hot and hog-tied with them little strings, next to hard old rigorous and callused cheeses for chunkin', for gratin'. Also, I gotta get one of them cured mozzarellas that looks like a schmoo that has been strangled and hanged by the neck. Chewy, musty outside, smooth and delicate autumn white inside.

A sliceable, steaming evening is settling over W'burg. I get my kid to show me the way past the huge concrete boulder blocks of some barrier-ed construction place to two of the "diners" to the north, close to the water sort of: **Relish**, and **Miss Williamsburg**. Both have got patios that appeal for a later coffee and dessert time together, ya know. Or it could be a brunch thing sometime. At **Relish**, I sweep past once, then peer in, tryin' to decipher the dark interior, the deep purple atmosphere of the place, to see what's up. I guess I'm right now lookin' for something simpler. That means head out to **Miss W. Diner**. The patio is glowing, flowery, with a Latino acoustic bunch, rionoché rhythmic. I head for the old diner part, which is what appeals to me, thinkin' cuppa joe and a slice o' somethin', but I'm told it's off limits just now. And hence, I'm off too.

Heat Stroke Prevents Coffee; Looking for Cool, Sweet

Gee, sun's droppin', temp's roarin', it's 93. I gotta hydrate and cool. What to do? Find **TOPS**, the kind of grocery-warehouse behind Bedford. Why? Because there's a cold room, really first class stuff there too, through which I gotta go to get to the whole bean coffees. I buy a cold bottle of something and look through the pickles. I chill, and I chill. In the next bay, the bean coffee looks presentable; there are two producers, organic, shade grown, and etc. Could be a place for whole bean, for home brew.

Next door, a new place for me, **Anytime**, 24-hour coffee with other food stuff, and a concrete stairway to the bar, very neo-indie, pierced. So was the shot, sharp, ya know, punked, tattooed. Maybe it was run too short, and was that East Coast light-light-roast-thing, at least for me.

Now's when I'm becoming serious about the evening sweet with the cup. The plan is to target Greenpoint for the "Polish pastry thing." So it's into the **Baron**, a relatively new and new-lookin' haus, I go.

It's still broilin' outside. Inside, I try. There's a case full of cream-filled "whatevers". I'm hot, hot. Fried things waft around. I reel. I'm back on the street. I glance over the shoulder and say: "I will return," and so forth.

What's left but to grab a mango off of the nite hawk Graham grocery street stand and attack it with cleaver back at the flat.

Should a Joe ever Search for the Joe that Useda Be?

Next day. . . (I'm skippin' the mornin'; you know that routine route now).

The idea is to look up what useda be around, maybe pre-hipster places, gauging the extent of W'burg eeeevolution. Some places on the northside, out of the Bedford zone, I guess.

Startin' out in search of the ole **Porto Rico**; was it there on the far eastern edge where they useda sell whole bean, maybe even roast there, or is that my imagination going again? Yes, I find it and right away wanna forget it already. The warehouse is surrounded by a high fence, no entrance, even though it says something about "gourmet coffees" er some such. I'm miffed about it; I go looking for **Moshe's** up behind Bedford on Wythe. In **Moshe's**, it useda be ya beseeched the bread matron for a euro-polska 2- pounder rye. The whole establishment was done up in rusky, polished pumpernickel. Do I recall the coffee on the burner in the corner, tough, industrial, begging for cream and sugar? And the loaves in the satin-dark bins, suggesting butter, jam, cream cheese. What I wanted was a version of . . . was it raisin rye?

Now, the place is sparkle-ized in some way hard to describe, with side hall of sort-of-café, and a deli place on the other side. No more bins, no bready smell or baked look. It's called **Moshe and Java**. So, I dunno. Take me back to before this is all.

Now I stop to think what's left. How about **Laura Bamonte's** near here somewhere. I head over; it looks like it's been there awhile, has 50's Italian neighborhood feel, it's not "haus" at all, just purposefully Italian. I looked and I looked. Could not be captured by it. 'Cause there was no coffee smell? 'Cause there was no one in it just then? 'Cause I just plain hesitated at it too long? I left. You could try it. Lemme know.

I gotta come up with something, thinking: "There's still **Joe's Busy Corner**, back toward home ground." I see it on the corner. @#%*!! What have they done? We're talkin' "italianate reno". Even my aneurysm dialed 911 as I stumbled up to it. Am I

supposed to be coming here? Yet I enter sort of bashful, like approaching the counter at Dean & Deluca for a buck's worth of mortadella.

The soul of the place seems the same: seems like the same staff, same patrons, same good eats laid out, more trendy plates is all. In the front, a real live espresso machine and little table in the window for a shot.

I gotta say I recall only that I had a cup. I guess it didn't knock me out and I got diverted by food. I admit it. Lost concentration about my mission. Though instead, I got me an amazing thing, a prosciutto bread, and to go with, a good dose of slippery roasted red peppers. And out the door.

Oh, you should know, **Porto Rico** coffee, whole bean, turned up to be here, and like it used to be—in burlap bags, in barrels, looked good. I wondered about its freshness, sittin' there. But it's an option for when you want some at home maybe.

At this point, I recapitulate: "Find more Italian places". I'm off to the far north of Graham, heading into **Café Capri**. Entirely, solidly Italian, Dean Martin, and yesterday: the travel posters, the boxes of panetoni on the shelf, the real and retro tables and chairs. The espresso was rich, creamy, with good temp and aroma, a swell, secret find. Across the street, the Society of Our lady of the Snow presents its annual feast and bazaar. I do zeppoli and a sweet, cheesy calzone, double-doused into the hot grease, but maybe a sort of anti-oxidant anyway. I feel substantialized. I'm headin' to the petite Father Jersey Popieluszko flower park for a tiny personal space, and then back to the home site.

Can it be Bedford is the Zona Rosa for Cafes? **Verb, Gray Parrot, L, Read, Cafes All**

It's too sweet to be on this street, so many possibilities. **Bedford** is the café strip of W'burg, with some real good stops. I am meanderin' from south to north up the street. I will skip mentioning any of the interesting interludes that are not strictly cafés, like the super, super taqueria in the back of the Mexideli (Matamoros Puebla Grocery), the total immersion, total Polish **Kasia**, closed Saturdays (how come?), and there's a lot more here.

First stop: **Verb**, real café-coffeehaus atmosphere at the side of the hipster little-mall. For me, it has the right feel. The brew is the right stuff in the right cup, a pretty good dark one. I'm set for more.

Next, I'm duckin' into **Gray Parrot**; seems to have . . . what, maybe Spanish feel. They were wondering why I was paying so much attention to the pour; said I was writing them up. Had good machine, good operator, good cup, good espresso, creamy, even though a lighter roast, still balanced and with nuance. Scores very high as straight espresso. Yet there was something in the air, a bit jumpy as to staff, a little unsettlin'.

So, further adventures up the street. Enterin' the icon of Bedford, **L Café**, there is a smoky haze, many puffers at work in the front. I duck out to the patio, with a chirpy morning crowd coaxing a bit more cool quiet out of the day. Ordered me a *macchiato* and chewy slabs of challah done up as French toast. Good and good. The drink had a

foamy top; it tasted like a dark roast appropriately, but the shot was long. And I wanted and pined for the textured (*senza sciuma*) little top mark in the cup.

I want richer. I cross over to **The Read**, a bookish coffeehaus with tiny kitchenette for waffles and counter of homey baked stuff. This is a meritorious watering hole. The barista knows the lingo. I order a *ristretto*, but funny that he doesn't know where the espresso blend is comin' from. Yeah, but the cup is poifectly sip-able, as I plop into the patio part. Good chat to be had over art with the arty types, the scene.

I gotta wind down; too much blood in the caffeine system. I'm concerned because I still haven't gotten into **Phoebe's** over on Graham, which has been working at it for a couple of years now. Maybe next trip out. 'Cause right now I'm off for the road haul back Upstate, which I am regrettin' already.

I point up Lorimer toward the BQE on-ramp and outta here. I'm lookin' down on what I love, I mean it means a lot to me, about this place, each coffeehaus--Italian, hipster, pierced and punk, Polish, relic, whatever--all the bakeries, pork shops, farmers' markets, and little park corners slidin' outta my view, my grasp.

It Ain't That There Ain't, and Please Don't Kiss 'Em Goodbye

I gotta tell ya: It ain't that there ain't no place to go. They are out there for you. If you wanna have the chains, the chain gang staff and chain gang fare, forget about it. Don't hit the **Bedford cafes**, don't sip a *ristretto* at the **Fortunato Bros**, don't take your cap' and croy-sant outta **Bruno's**, and don't stop some slow afternoon on north Graham at the **Capri**.

And if ya don't, they're gonna be gone for ya! Please don't kiss 'em goodbye.

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