

Becoming an Expert in Irish Coffee

Winding my way down the narrow and crowded streets of downtown Dublin I stumble onto Grafton Street, the main thoroughfare for tourists. Crowded with shops selling “authentically Irish” souvenirs and transnational fast chain restaurants, this is where non-Irish come to experience Dublin. I am running about 20 minutes early for my class at the Dublin Barista School, so I decide to burn off a little time with a cup of coffee before I take the first major step into becoming a “coffee expert”. I slipped into the McCafé, right off St. Stephen’s Green and ordered a black filter coffee. The irony of sipping on a commodity grade cup of coffee while just minutes away from starting on a certification course in specialty coffee was not lost on me. I actually rather enjoyed this deliberate act of subversion before I was supposed to “know better”.

The menu was straightforward and expected, filter coffee, cappuccino, latte, Americano, espresso, or frappe blended beverage. The décor in the café suggested some Latin American or African origin for their coffee, but the employee was not sure where they sourced the beans or how it was roasted. There was a small Rainforest Alliance Certified sticker next to the cash register, but he did not know what that meant other than it was “supposed to be healthier for you or better for the environment”. He had never really tried coffee and was mostly familiar with how to put the cup under the spout and hit a button. He also knew that the apple pie and chocolate muffins inside the café side of the restaurant is the same price as the regular McDonald’s, which he thought was neat considering the “improved and classy look” of the McCafé, compared to the regular part of the adjoining fast food restaurant. He is 16 years old, and enjoying his gap year before cramming for his exit certification exams. He plans to go into some kind of business degree at university, and thinks seeing some of the café management is

helpful, but does not plan to continue a path as a barista. I tell him that I have come to Ireland just to study the coffee and become a certified barista and he asks me if I plan to use that to get a “real job” owning or managing a major coffee shop. I ordered the filter coffee, black, and no room. The coffee was hot, black, slightly bitter, and served in a black paper cup. It reminded me of the large batches of coffee boiled up and served to American office workers. The accoutrements like milk and sugar sat on a table off to the side next to the ketchup and salt which were used to season food at McDonalds.

The Dublin Barista School was just a few blocks down Grafton street at the corner of Anne Street, a side street that featuring higher-end cafes and shops. The school itself sits across from Coffeeangel, which was Ireland’s first third wave coffeehouse, and a high-end cheese monger. The shops on this block all cater to a clientele who have an interest in artisanal foods that require a degree of craft and expertise to produce. The stark contrast between the mass produced items on Grafton Street that were mass produced with a focus on low cost consumption and Anne Street is reflective of this shifting trend in coffee from commodity to craft beverage.

The Dublin Barista School was started by James McCormack after the economic crash of 2008. While he did not have a particular interest in coffee when he purchased the turnkey shop, he is now arguably one of the leading purveyors of coffee knowledge in Dublin. Over a lunch during my training he told me about his entrance to the world of specialty coffee and his decision to buy 9th Degree Roasters and start the Dublin Barista School. Both Dublin Barista School, which is a *coffeehouse* and a teaching institution and 9th Degree Roasters, which is a *coffee roasting house* (I will better define and differentiate the terms *coffeehouse* and *coffee roasting house* in more detail shortly) have a focus on specialty, third wave coffee served at a premium price by people who have more training than the typical counter person at a Starbucks or Butler’s

Chocolate Cafe. Butler's Chocolate Café is a second wave coffee house headquartered in Dublin with franchised locations all over the world. It is interesting that one of the popular paths for many of the third wave baristas and customers. Especially in a tea drinking nation like Ireland is to first start at a second wave shop like Costa, Insomnia Café, or Butler's Chocolate Café then migrate to a third wave coffeehouse like 9th Degree Roasters or Vice.

The Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) defines specialty coffee as Arabica coffee that scores at least 80 out of 100 points as determined by a coffee industry expert. Specialty coffee is typically part of the third wave of coffee. The notion of first, second and third wave coffee was first introduced by Trish Skeie (2003) and further refined by Nicholas Cho (2005) and Los Angeles Times food critic Jonathan Gold (2008). Essentially, first wave coffee came about in the late 1800's with the introduction of home coffee like Maxwell House and Folgers. Second wave coffee launched in the late 1960's in Seattle with the creation of specialty coffeehouses like Peet's and Starbucks. Third wave coffee seeks to further the customers' relationship with coffee by elevating it above commodity status and making it analogues to wine, prizing terroir and artisanal production over mass production. Starbucks, a second wave coffeehouse will label their coffee with a generic region or country. This label can sometimes change between the origin (Ethiopia, Chiapas, and Sumatra) and the roast (French, Italian, and Verona). Third wave coffeehouses will label the coffee by the specific region, and even sometimes by the specific farm. For example, 3fE, a third wave coffee roasting house in Dublin sells a Bolivian coffee called Juana Gonzales. When you order this coffee, like any of the coffees, you do so by the farmer's name and are able to read the story about the farmers and their farms. The placard on this particular coffee reads:

"This is the first time we have coffee from this farm, and we are really impressed! The farm is

only three hectares and because of its small size, the owners Juana and Julio are the only ones that work on it. 2017 was the first year they produced coffee with help from the Sol de la Mañana project, an initiative which supports individual coffee farmers in Bolivia by providing the information and tools necessary for producing high quality coffee and improving farmers' income." Second wave and third wave coffeehouses also differ in how the coffee is prepared. Second wave coffee houses will brew black coffee eight gallons at a time in large drip machines. Third wave coffeehouses typically do not have "drip" or "filter" coffee, instead they make each cup as it is ordered through either pour over, siphon, French press, or Aeropress methods. This requires the barista to spend approximately four minutes on each black coffee. These methods also require more training and expertise to properly make a cup of coffee. Third wave coffeehouses will prepare the beverages in full view of the customer, usually performing expertise enactments like chin touching or head nodding as they weigh, measure, grind, and prepare the coffee. They also typically do not offer blended beverages (name brand known as iced Frappuccinos, the milkshake like drinks made popular by Starbucks) that are a staple at second wave coffeehouses.

Third wave coffeehouses also offer cuppings for their customers. These ethnographically rich interactions are highly ritualized, in the basic definition of the word and are the pinnacle of expertise in the coffee community. At a cupping customers are invited to sample new varietals the coffeehouse is considering selling. At a cupping each participant gathers around a large table with several cups filled with dry, ground coffee. The participants will smell the dry coffee and mark their impressions on a sheet using the SCA (Specialty Coffee Association) or Counter Culture flavor profile chart as a vocabulary guide. The cupper will then pour hot water over the dry grounds and once again the participants smell the cup, several times noting the minute

changes as the hot water opens the coffee's aroma. Then, after three minutes (usually dictated by a large digital timer) participants scoop the crust (floating grounds) off the top of the cup and use a spoon to slurp the coffee. These slurps are usually very loud and theatrical. Participants nod and smile or scowl while performing expertise notions like head nods, thinking faces, or pondering poses (Boyer 2005, Carr 2010). It is through the repeated cupping process that consumers are supposedly able to develop a coffee palate that will allow them to identify geography and other subtleties that are hidden to the untrained drinker.

For the purpose of this paper I will use the terms coffeehouse and coffee roasting house to discuss my field sites in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter just referred to as Ireland). A coffeehouse is different from a café or restaurant in the way they serve and discuss coffee. Cafés and restaurants have a stronger focus on food production and consumption and frequently use coffee as a way to pad their financial margins. Simply put a coffeehouse is a place where the menu is focused on coffee rather than food or other non-coffee beverages like soda, wine, or smoothies. Coffee roasting houses are similar to coffeehouses, except they roast their own coffee, typically on site or at a nearby location. These spaces appear similar to coffeehouses. While financial statistics are hard to come by with privately owned businesses, the ones I selected for observation confirmed a majority (my colloquial loosely defined term) of their sales come from prepared specialty coffee. This differentiation is important because coffee, a recent addition to the Irish menu, has swept the country in a fever storm and now many of the restaurants and cafes have a small automatic espresso maker and have a limited coffee menu.

While specialty coffee in Ireland only dates back to 2008 (Coffeeangel), the first coffeehouses opened in Ireland in 1664 and by the end of the 17th century were a ubiquitous feature in the Dublin cityscape. After Great Britain acquired India as a colony and shifted its

focus to tea, Ireland, which was under British rule, also abandoned its consumption of coffee and shifted to tea. However, the Irish which has historically occupied a lower different socio-economic position from England never adopted the teahouse and high tea culture so strongly identified with English culture (Browne 2013; Cannedy 2018). Specialty coffee has grown exponentially in Ireland in the first 10 years. As of mid-2018 there are approximately 174 specialty coffeehouses and an additional 10 coffee roasting houses in Ireland. This number does not include Butler Chocolate Café (an Irish based transnational café), Java Republic, or Starbucks. Those are seen as gateways to specialty coffee introducing customers to specialty coffee while selling higher quality coffee at slightly higher than commodity grade prices to the masses. Many of the baristas who currently work in specialty coffee in Dublin started at those second wave shops, especially Butler's Chocolate Café.



The Dublin Barista School is a narrow three story building sandwiched between a jewelry store and a clothing shop. On the left side is a coffee bar with all sorts of coffee apparatus and a register. In contrast to the McDonald's, the menu tells me exactly where the coffee is sourced,

the roasting profile, and the roast date. One coffee is specifically for espresso, another for filter, and a third for other manual brew methods like pour-over and Aeropress. The barista quickly asks for my order. I explain that I am here for the barista certification course, but would love a cup of coffee before it starts and asked for a recommendation. The Barista immediately launched into a jargon filled sales pitch about the benefits of each type of coffee and their expert preparation methods. I asked about the Ethiopian Sidamo filter coffee and was immediately answered with discussion about the flavor profile that assumed some prior knowledge on my part. He discussed the coffee in terms of what I would normally expect from an Ethiopian coffee, and contrasted that this roast was missing the expected blueberry and lemon notes. I took the cup, sipped and nodded in agreement about the missing blueberry flavor and headed upstairs to the first day of training course.

There were six students (myself included) and an instructor in the training room, a small and cramped room just above the main seating area for the Dublin Barista School café. As the first class was starting we had to go around the room, introduce ourselves, and discuss why we signed up for the weeklong course. Louise spoke first. She is a 43-year-old stay at home mother whose husband paid for her to take the course. Smartly dressed with her brunette hair in a well-groomed bob, she thinks being a barista will be a fun part-time job once she and her husband become empty nesters. She is also considering opening her own coffeehouse closer to her home at the beach. She is particularly excited about the prospect of having an actual job (something she has not had since she was in college) and some pocket money. She does not drink coffee on a regular basis and is lactose intolerant. She expresses some concern about both of those issues. The instructor told her that she will come to love coffee once she tries good coffee that is properly prepared by someone who is properly trained. Louise was the second person I met who

was taking a coffee training course who had no interest in drinking coffee, but saw it as a “romantic Saturday job”. Sasha, a 36-year-old office worker from Slovenia went next. She was in Ireland on vacation and thought the class would be a fun way to spend one of her three holiday weeks. Youthful in appearance, the class originally guessed she was in her mid-20’s, wearing sweaters and jeans she is an office worker in Slovenia and is considering switching to either opening a coffeehouse or working as a barista. “If not” she says “I will still be able to make an amazing cup of coffee after this class”. She tells the class that coffee is integral to her culture and they like to drink copious amounts of thick, strong, black coffee. Nescafe is her favorite brand. She is not sure about all of this fancy marketing around “super weak, tea-like coffee”, but said she will keep an open mind. Laura, an 18-year-old woman with her strawberry blonde hair pulled into a messy ponytail, wearing thick glasses, black jeans, and a t-shirt underneath a well-worn red, yellow, and green flannel shirt spoke next. She is an 18-year-old Londoner whose parents sent her to this course as a way to give her some direction and qualification. She occasionally drank coffee while in school, but was not too excited about serving it to others. Kristofer a lanky 16-year-old gap year student with long shaggy hair, wearing jeans and a t-shirt and a black rope necklace with a silver Thor’s hammer medallion sat next to Laura. He actually wants to work as a barista and has dreams to open his own coffeehouse one day. He feels pretty indifferent toward his exit exams and is not sure college is right for him. However, he later confessed to me over lunch, he has crippling social anxiety and is terrified of making small talk with strangers. He is hoping that this class will give him the confidence to be a bit more of an extrovert while helping him see if coffee really a career he wants to pursue. Boris was the fifth, and final student (excluding me) to introduce himself. He is a sharply dressed man in his mid-20s. He is well groomed and exerts a sense of confidence. He is wearing Adidas track pants, white sneakers, a

white t-shirt with the logo of a well-known fashion designer blazed across the front, and a pair of designer sunglasses on his head. He says a few words in Russian and winks at Sasha who then smiles out of one corner of her mouth and shyly looks down. Boris then turns to the class and recites a comparatively impressive barista resume. He has worked at various second wave coffee shops like Butler's Chocolate Café, Starbucks, and Costa for the past 10 years or so and is hoping this certification course will give him the endorsement he needs to finally break into the world of specialty coffee.



The instructor, Luis, introduces himself. He too has worked in second wave shops like Butler's Chocolate Café for the past several years and is now the head trainer at 9th Degree Roasters and Dublin Barista School. Originally from Venezuela, he is equally proud of both his master's degree in mechanical engineering and the fact he was an Irish Latte Art finalist three years running. He wears a skin tight red t-shirt and black jeans, his rust colored hair perfectly cut

and combed fades into a tightly manicured beard. His Spanish / Irish accent is borderline theatrical which is fitting for his animated physicality. Luis is a master at self-promotion, bragging immediately about his self-reliant climb from lowly immigrant who started off cleaning the toilets at Butler's Chocolate Café to head trainer at one of the most prestigious barista schools in the British Isles. He immediately takes a liking to Boris and starts making inside jokes with him referencing people in management at Butler's Chocolate Café, their shared former employer. He then turns to engage me and makes thinly veiled jokes about starring in the film portion of my research and the main subject of my dissertation. "I've never been in a movie before... at least not one I can show my mother" he gregariously laughed at his own joke. I chuckled and looked awkwardly at the 15 page textbook in front of me.



Luis started the class by giving a brief history lesson in coffee then moving into the different types of beans and roasts. He talked about what makes “good” coffee (obviously what



is served at the Dublin Barista School and 9th Degree Roasters is good coffee) and what makes a “bad” coffee. Luis explains the perfect water temperature for pulling an espresso shot, the coffee to water ratio, and the grind calibration. We learned how to use refractometers to “read” the amount of light coming through our coffee which ideally is 9.5% for espresso and between 1.2% and 1.5% for brewed coffee. Throughout the course we learn the appropriate terminology for each piece of coffee apparatus behind the bar and are frequently

reminded about the upcoming vocabulary test. Luis made a point to frequently tell the class that just using the improper name for a piece of equipment can get you in trouble because coffee, like mechanical engineering, is a precise act requiring work and dedication. He told us that the way you dress and present yourself to the customer while making the drink will have a greater impact on the customer's experience than the actual beverage. The way you pinch the handle on the milk jug between your thumb and index finger when steaming the milk, the way you hold the coffee cup while pouring the steamed milk and presenting it helps communicate your level of expertise. These seemingly minor details can have a major influence on your ability to get promotions or, and this was his bigger concern, at barista competitions. "The judges will count off big if you are not holding the coffee cup at a 45 degree angle to the milk jug. It's bad form and makes the foam pour out wrong" he exclaimed. Luis views himself as a showman. He understands that for many customers the act of being seen with the right coffee and the correct shop is enough of a signal of expertise. His

Instagram feed, which has 3343 followers, features photos of him making various coffee beverages using what Boyer (2005) and Carr (2010) would term "expert posturing". Holding your hands just right, your face intent on the beverage, your legs slightly apart to look steady and



focused. The capital gained from engaging in this expert posturing on social media can help create an echo chamber reinforcing your role as an expert (Rousseau 2012). It is through viewing and mimicking the perceived experts on social media that the unindoctrinated better understand a subject. Social media is the new reference library.



On one of the lunch breaks we had during the weeklong training course I asked Luis about his favorite coffeehouses in Dublin. He told me his top five places, prefacing each establishment with how trendy the space and its Instagram accounts are at the moment. He told me about his time at Butler's Chocolate Café. He said while the space is clean and well organized it lacks the personality that he enjoys so much in specialty coffee. Specialty coffee is

an experience and in that theatre of consumption is where patrons are elevated from simple patrons to participants in the act of consuming specialty coffee. Luis understands that consuming specialty coffee is a public act, performed in a public space. As Bourdieu put it “The cafe is not a place a man goes to for a drink but a place he goes to in order to drink in company” (1984: 183). The privilege of having this knowledge is the ability to perform and share it in a public setting with others. This is where the novice is able to become the amateur then the expert in specialty coffee.

Boris, on the other hand, is more akin to the Japanese coffee masters. He is more concerned with making sure the coffee embodies *kodawari* than putting on theatre for his patrons. *Kodawari* is the drive to make as perfect a craft as possible for your customers. Embodied in the object rather than the craftsperson, *kodawari* shifts the focus from the producer to the consumer (White 2012: 67). While the patron may acknowledge the barista’s expertise, the point is lost if that is the majority of the customer’s gratitude. Like Luis, Boris came to specialty coffee after spending years working behind the counter at second wave coffee houses like Butler’s Chocolate Café. It is in these first years that Boris says he learned how to appreciate the subtleties and nuances of coffee, but realized there is more still to uncover in coffee making and so he enrolled in the course to become the expert. He believes that with an average price of €3.07 per cup (UCC 2017), the beverage should be transformative to the customer. Using Bourdieu’s food space (1984: 186), Boris targets the patron who is rich in both cultural and economic capital. He sees the darker roasts of second wave coffee like the cheap, heavy, strong, simmered foods at the bottom of the table. Those reserved for people who have neither economic nor cultural capital. The light, delicate, fruity, jammy, and naturally sweet flavors in third wave specialty coffee appeal to those who have both the expertise and knowledge to appreciate such

flavors. He feels it is his job to help guide the patron to “better” coffee that is “correctly roasted”. He realizes that Anne Street, with its specialty artisanal food shops like Dublin Barista School and Coffeeangel are literally just feet away from Grafton Street, where people can get essentially the same product for much less money.

According to a recent survey the average Irish person would be willing to spend over €5 on a perfect cup of coffee and approximately 40% of Dubliners take at least one coffee from a coffeehouse every day. So how did the nation with the second largest rate of per capita tea consumption suddenly see 147 specialty coffee shops open since 2008 and a projected 7% growth in the Irish coffee market forecast in the next five years? Economics and migration.

Like much of the world, Ireland’s economy started to slide in 2004 and took a nosedive in 2008. As a result many of its young adults left the country and headed to find work in other countries. One of the most popular destinations was Australia (Irving 2017). Australia’s economy was insulated against the worst of the shocks felt in Europe and the United States. A fellow commonwealth nation, Irish citizens were allowed to apply for working visas. Many of these migrant workers settled in Melbourne, which is on the cutting edge of coffee culture and technology. Australians see coffee as a part of their daily routine and an affordable luxury in their lives spending \$4.3 billion dollars per year at coffeehouses. Independent coffeehouses outpace coffee chains, a trend that is expected to continue. As Australia’s coffee culture matured, so did the expectations of their customers. Organic and free trade are not the expectation, not the exception. However, unlike the United States, which has a strong focus on filter and batch brew coffee, Australia focuses on espresso based beverages, most notable the flat white. The flat white, which is essentially a latte with a little less foam, is now served in McCafe’s and Starbucks all over both Ireland and Australia. McDonald’s recently released a commercial that

explained the flat while that way in their stores while baristas in specialty shops had a mouthful of meaningless jargon that embarrassed and shamed the uninitiated. This served as a way for the proletariat to mock the culturally rich coffee experts.

The first specialty coffeehouse in Ireland, Coffeeangel, was started by Kyle Purdy, a Canadian who spent much of his time living and working in Australia (coffeeangel). When he set up the first Coffeeangel kiosk he relied on his coffee knowledge from Canada and Australia, and served mostly espresso beverages. As coffee started to spread across Ireland people relied on that first coffeehouse as the bellwether for specialty coffee and expertise on what constitutes “good” coffee. Not long after the economy rebounded, giving Irish citizens more disposable income which allowed for the permissible leisure of specialty coffee consumption. This lead to the spread of specialty coffeehouses across Ireland. At the same time many of the ex-pats returned from Australia also with a new found love for coffee over tea. As one Amazon executive told me while he was purchasing a coffee from me “You can’t be in high tech and drink tea. It just doesn’t cut it.” With Brexit on the horizon many transnational corporations are looking to abandon London with an eye to Dublin. Facebook and Amazon have already set up headquarters, and several banking firms may follow suit. This is helping propel the economy into meteoric growth. It is also bringing with it people who have high amounts of both cultural and economic capital and they are demanding coffee that is expected for their status. This typically means high quality specialty coffee. This has lead to the creation of a series of books titled the Independent Coffee Guides. These divide the British Isles geopolitically and print the best places to get coffee with a blurb about the location and owner. This guide is designed to pull Ireland into third wave specialty coffee and also show their prestige in specialty coffee.

So as Dublin experiences an artisanal renaissance the need for experts increases. That brings us back to places like 3fE and the Dublin Barista School which both offer weekly classes helping to train the waves of would be baristas into the world of specialty coffee. Showing them the steps beyond pushing buttons and handing over paper cups, these schools help show students the physical and verbal language needed to sell a craft product. It helps with the vocabulary to discuss the light and nuanced flavors that only those “in the know” can expect from specialty coffee and have the distinction to appreciate. Like fine wine and rare cheese, both available on Anne Street, but not Grafton, coffee is finding its place in Irish society as a beverage of class and luxury. Allowing people to gather under a sober umbrella and discuss the day’s events. Tea is still popular, and will never face from the Irish diet, but it is not coffee. Tea is not a public beverage, and as coffee becomes more popular and the rift with Britain grows, tea will continue to be a private beverage, while coffee will be the beverage of public consumption, permissible leisure, prepared by experts for ingestion by those who are sophisticated enough to appreciate the nuance and light sweet taste of specialty coffee.



For many students documenting and posting their experience on social media was as important as being in the class



I was still elevated into the realm of the expert despite this reaction from Luis after tasting the first espresso shot I pulled.



Christopher LeClere working as a barista at 9th Degree Roasters under the training of Renata Khedun, the 2018 Irish Latte Art champion.

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