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## Coffee Smarts, Cup by Cup Counter Culture Wins Fans With Education

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In a sunny second-floor room with a view of Adams Morgan's 18th Street and an overpowering aroma of freshly ground coffee, Alex Brown is steeped in quality control.

A handful of 20- and 30-somethings with bar towels tucked into their back pockets are familiarizing themselves with fancy espresso machines as Brown, 28, hovers nearby and peers into a cup of espresso.

"Make sure the color's not too light," he advises, then turns to a participant who has been working on his steaming skills. "The milk should look like wet paint: viscous, thick and foamy."

This could be a seminar on making the ultimate cappuccino, but there are larger aspirations at stake. The trainees are recently hired baristas for Mid City Caffè, a coffeehouse set to open on 14th Street NW in midsummer. Brown and the room with a view, meanwhile, belong to Counter Culture Coffee, a North Carolina buyer and roaster with a dedication to high-quality coffee and a growing following in the Washington area.

Long before Mid City's owner, Mick Mier, hired any employees, he knew he wanted to serve "a wicked good product," as he puts it. After some research, he settled on Counter Culture, joining a host of other local cafes such as Peregrine, Big Bear, Tryst and Alexandria's Grape + Bean, known for their sweet, rich espresso with layered flavors and a subtle bitterness reminiscent of dark chocolate.



What Mier wound up with wasn't just an agreement for a weekly shipment of beans. Unique even among elite roasters, Counter Culture places a premium on coffee education. With five other training centers along the East Coast serving as classrooms, the company has developed a curriculum that covers geeky facts on the science of espresso and the pros and cons of various brewing techniques.

On Fridays, the company holds cuppings (tastings) to suss out the flavor of new beans and to develop participants' palates so they can eventually identify elements such as citrus, caramel and "snappy acidity."

The public is invited to the Friday cuppings, and any of the company's clients can take part in the free classes and sporadic labs (see "Join a Cupping"). It is

the new clients, though, who are particularly encouraged to send over their baristas for instruction on all the details that go into creating a consistently excellent cup of coffee.

The training -- which, in Mid City's case, took three mornings -- is not held for altruistic reasons. Rather, it is a vital final step in the process, from growing and buying to roasting and brewing, characterized by careful attention to detail.

Established in 1995 in Durham, N.C., Counter Culture is part of a small but growing group of coffee companies that cultivate direct relationships with growers in an effort to improve the quality of the beans they buy. Like microbreweries, these companies, which include Blue Bottle of Oakland, Calif., and Stumptown Coffee Roasters of Portland, Ore., are determined to expose consumers to fresh, fairly traded and tasty alternatives to stale office coffee or the flat, bitter espresso served by some ubiquitous chains.

Counter Culture staffers describe their mission in part as an effort to reshape the way Americans think about coffee. In an ideal world, they say, drinkers might liken it to wine: an artisan product with specific seasons and a wide variety of subtle flavors to be savored, not something so lacking in value that it is served in a bottomless cup.

But it's a work in progress. "The model isn't quite there yet for coffee," says Brett Smith, Counter Culture's president and co-founder. "Ultimately, the consumer doesn't have a sense of the true value of coffee. Often, the farmer is barely making enough to get by."

The company appears to be doing its best to change that, starting with its relationship with growers. Its "farmer-partners," who are located in countries as diverse as Bolivia, Burundi and Papua New Guinea and are particularly concentrated in Latin America, are guaranteed a fair, consistent price for their product as long as the beans meet certain standards, and the company has worked with them to improve quality over time. Counter Culture's best relationships with coffee farmers are more than five years old, enhanced by regular visits from employees and augmented by a culture of transparency around costs and payments.

On the domestic side of the equation, the company seems equally determined to raise the profile of coffee. Finding the best roast for a new Salvadoran variety, for example, took a week's worth of experimentation and multiple cuppings to determine the optimal flavor. The company limits its sales to the East Coast, so the product is received when it's still fresh, and it encourages clients to order only a week's supply at a time. Educating baristas and the public, employees say, was the missing piece. Although the company was sourcing great beans and processing them with care, staff members at last recognized that superior quality wasn't necessarily being delivered to consumers.

"Coffee is so sensitive to how it's prepared," says Peter Giuliano, Counter Culture's director of coffee. "We felt like about 80 percent of the coffee was ruined before it made it into anyone's cup, because we weren't addressing the last mile."

Thus began the company's emphasis on education. It started internally around 2000, with Friday office cuppings that encouraged employees to discuss the characteristics of what they were drinking. Soon the company opened its Durham office to local baristas.

The result: "People started to participate and get fired up," says Giuliano. "And we thought, what if we try it in another place?" In 2005, the company opened its first satellite training center in Charlotte, N.C. "It had a positive effect," Giuliano says. "The coffee in the area started getting better, and people started saying, 'Wow, I didn't know there was so much good coffee.' "

So Counter Culture set up training centers in Atlanta and in Asheville, N.C. The Washington unit opened in 2007, and a Manhattan center was inaugurated a few months ago. The reception in each location has been great, Giuliano says. Consequently, coffee education has become one of Counter Culture's defining elements, on an equal standing with the product itself.

Tim Chapdelaine, an importer with Minnesota's Cafe Imports and a close observer of the coffee business for almost two decades, frequently ships beans from their country of origin for Counter Culture. He applauds the company's emphasis on empowering customers through education: "They have a different vision. Nobody else has training centers. They'll do a lot to increase appreciation of coffee on the East Coast, I'm sure."

Maybe. But the centers represent a big financial leap of faith for the company: All classes and events are free, and each center is staffed by a full-time employee. That means each one is an investment in an area's coffee scene, with the hope that it will pay off in increased business.

In Washington's case, it has worked out so far. Counter Culture went from having about 25 clients in the area when the training center opened to now selling to more than 40 local cafes and restaurants, with virtually no formal marketing.

Of course, it didn't hurt that the city was on the verge of improving its cafe culture around that time, with local business owners joining a national clamor for better coffee. An emerging American backlash against mass-produced food probably played a role, too.

Whatever the reason, Washington has benefited just as much as Counter Culture has. Over the past three or four years, the city's cafe scene has expanded. Counter Culture's representatives say the coffee community in this city is as strong as anywhere on the East Coast.

Mid City Caffe should be another high-quality addition -- if owner Mick Mier follows the instructions of Alex Brown, that is. There are signs that Mier and his staff have caught on: On the final morning of training, one of the baristas makes a cappuccino that earns the exacting Brown's approval.

Watching from the sidelines, Mier seems awed by the focused assistance. "I've never encountered someone so customer-oriented," he says of Counter Culture."