Espresso’s New Wave Hits Town

YOU might first notice the guy behind the counter with the pirate-worthy tattoos or the chromed-out espresso machine he’s operating. Your attention might be momentarily drawn to the name of the beans he’s using — like Agrica BV Calama Marka or Platinum Blonde: The Rowdy Gals’ Espresso Blend.

But at the best cafes in New York — like Café Grumpy in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, or Gimme! Coffee in Williamsburg, Brooklyn — it’s the coffee itself that will grab you.

Most espresso drinks in this country are made with over-roasted blends on “super automatic” machines that leave little control to the person operating them and turn out anonymous brews.

At cafes that are part of what some call the artisanal coffee movement the drinks reflect an obsession with each detail of the journey from farm to cup and an almost cultish pride in the results.

Those results are apparent as soon as you pick up the cup. The crema that crowns these espressos is a ruddy, alluring come-on that persists as you decide whether it’s closer to the color of terra cotta or burnt sienna. It’s not the pale froth that quickly dissipates on lesser espressos. And it’s evidence that the sugars and oils in the coffee have been properly emulsified through careful brewing.
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The aroma will be more nuanced — with suggestions of scents like jasmine and orange — reflecting the pedigree of the beans it’s made with, and the care and precision with which it was brewed.

It will feel richer, fuller and more viscous in your mouth. The acidity of the coffee will be balanced; the tannins will contribute shape, not sting.

If you take milk, it will be steamed to order just for your drink — a top-quality cafe never uses the same milk twice. And it will be poured to create a pattern in the crema — a heart, a leaf — that not only makes the drink more appetizing, but demonstrates the attention paid to it.

Drinks at these shops are in a style that took root in the 1990’s in Seattle cafes like Espresso Vivace Roasteria and Hine’s Public Market. While the cafes thrived in the Northwest, New York was seen as a backwater among coffee geeks, a label proudly adopted by the scene’s premier Web site, www.coffeegeek.com.

Ninth Street Espresso in the East Village earned the first ripple of recognition for New York’s coffee scene when it opened in 2000. Since then a handful of other top-flight shops have opened, including three in northwestern Brooklyn: Gimme!; the Oslo Coffee Company, also in Williamsburg; and, most recently, Café Grumpy. Oslo opened a second Williamsburg branch last month; Café Grumpy is building a second location in Manhattan, in Chelsea. Baristas like Dan Griffin, who recently left the celebrated coffee spot Albina Press in Portland, Ore., will be setting up shop soon in the West Village.

After an overcaffeinated tour of these cafes, Gregory Dicum, the co-author, with Nina Luttinger, of the recently updated “The Coffee Book” (New Press, 2006), defined what separates these shops from their peers. “It’s ingredients, equipment and technique,” Mr. Dicum said, “but it’s also an attitude that embodies craftsmanship and artistry.”

The craftsmanship and artistry are largely in the hands of the baristas, those who make the coffee. Some, like Bob Peyton, at Ninth Street Espresso, and Samuel Crane, at Café Grumpy, learned the ropes in the Northwest — both worked at Victrola Coffee and Art in Seattle. (Along with a love for coffee, many share a love for tattoos. Among the frescoes on Christopher Owens at Gimme! is a demitasse of espresso on his left wrist.)

The baristas I spoke to were informed and opinionated about what was happening in their cafes — like the exact temperature they were using to brew a particular roast of coffee — and in the coffee world at large. And though their intensity might seem as off-putting as some of their tattoos, all were ready to talk with customers about any aspect of coffeemaking (as long as the conversation wasn’t interrupting their flow during the morning rush).

It starts with the beans. You won’t see vacuum-packed beans from a giant Italian processor at any artisanal coffee shop. Freshly roasted beans are the rule.

Interest has grown in bean origin and coffees from single farms — Samuel Crane of Café Grumpy said a good barista should be able to tell you whether your Ethiopian coffee is from Sidamo or Harar. But most espresso is made from a blend roasted at the shop or by a highly regarded roaster.
Unlike Italian blends, blends at these cafes contain little, if any, robusta, a variety of coffee that contributes to the formation of a good crema (the emulsification of bean oils and sugars on top of a shot of espresso) but add little in the way of desirable flavors.

And though almost all of the coffee used to make espresso in this country is roasted to a shiny black color, the beans typically used in these cafes are somewhere closer to a medium-dark roast. J. D. Merget, the owner of Oslo, explained: “It’s like grilling meat; if you char it but don’t burn it, you get to taste both the meat and the char. If you burn it all the way through, you’re just tasting char.”

Those beans are ground seconds before being tucked into machines that inspire as much zeal as the provenance of the beans.

The vanguard of commercial espresso machines today is the Cyncra made by Synesso, a three-person, two-year-old company in Seattle. It costs $9,500 and only 175 have been made, with only five in New York State. It’s prized for the degree of control it offers the coffeemaker. Among its many geeked-out attributes, the Cyncra will reliably heat water to within a half of a degree of the temperature desired.

Though that may seem like an insignificant feature, it’s crucial to baristas. Temperature is one of the four major variables under a barista’s control. The others are the fineness of the grind, the dose (the amount of coffee used per shot) and the way those grounds are tamped, or compacted, to regulate the flow of water through them.

Dosing is generally a matter of a house style at each cafe. Gimme! Coffee in Brooklyn uses 19 grams of coffee for each 1- to 1¼-ounce shot; Ninth Street Espresso uses 21 grams for each 2- to 2¼-ounce shot. (Baristas in training use a digital scale to weigh the portafilter, which holds the grounds, to make sure they are dosing it perfectly.)

The type of shot achieved by this level of dosing is called “ristretto,” Italian for “restricted.” It is a shorter shot using more coffee than the industry standard, which would be 7 grams of coffee per 1-ounce espresso. Ken Nye, owner of Ninth Street Espresso, says he prefers ristretto shots “because they have a different mouth-feel, in my opinion — denser, thicker and heavier.”

Ristretto shots, he said, are less likely to be over-extracted — meaning that the brewing has drawn out more of the undesirable flavors in the coffee — or under-extracted — resulting in a weak drink and bone white and flavorless crema. Over- and under-extracted espressos are easy to spot; their cremas are too light or too dark or flecked with white spots or streaky white lines.

Tamping is also codified. At Ninth Street Espresso, it’s 30 pounds of pressure. Mr. Nye encourages his baristas-in-training to practice tamping espresso grounds into the portafilter on a bathroom scale so they know what 30 pounds feels like.

Then it’s time to lock the portafilter and brew. If they can, cafes will adjust the temperature on their machines to match the coffee they’re brewing. Gimme! brews its house blend, Leftist, at 198 degrees. Ninth Street Espresso, which has been featuring beans from the North Carolina cafe Counter Culture Coffee for the past few weeks, has turned up the setting to 203 degrees from 201.5 degrees. Baristas decide on temperatures after cupping (lingo for tasting) a few rounds of a specific coffee brewed at a range of temperatures.

Baristas really strut their stuff when adding the milk — which should be laced with a fine foam, like “wet paint,” to use Mr. Nye’s favored description, not frothy and bubbly. By manipulating the milk pitcher, they top lattes and cappuccinos with hearts and clovers and more. When pouring a pattern called a rosetta, which looks like a branch of a fern, baristas distinguish themselves by how many fronds — achieved by a quick trick of the wrist — they can deck it out with.

Bob Peyton, who says he dispenses the occasional 28-leaf rosetta as a barista at Ninth
Street Espresso, is helping to bring this style of coffee to an arena that rarely has espresso drinks worth loving: the fine-dining restaurant. Colin Alevras, the chef of the Tasting Room, has a Cynara at his restaurant in its new NoLIta location (“It cost more than any other single piece of equipment in the restaurant,” he is quick to say) and hired Mr. Peyton to train his staff, which includes a dedicated barista on weekend nights.

Despite their tattoos and often rough-and-tumble venues, baristas think fine coffee should be right at home in a fine restaurant.

“We want to present coffee in a culinary context,” said Mr. Crane of Café Grumpy. “It’s not just a fix anymore.”

Baristaville

Where to get artisanal coffee in New York:

**NINTH STREET ESPRESSO** 700 East Ninth Street (Avenue C), East Village, (212) 358-9225.

**GIMME! COFFEE** 495 Lorimer Street (Powers Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 388-7771.

**CAFÉ GRUMPY** 193 Meserole Avenue (Diamond Street), Greenpoint, Brooklyn; (718) 349-7623.

**OSLO COFFEE COMPANY** 133-B Roebling Street (North Fourth Street) and 328 Bedford Avenue (South Third Street), Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 782-0332.

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