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Good Things Are Brewing for Coffee Lovers

By Lavanya Ramanathan
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Paris, Rome, New York, San Francisco, even Austin are coffeehouse cities, teeming with places for chic office workers to quickly sip demitasses of espresso and students with laptops to camp out with steaming lattes.

For all its urbanness, Washington, on the other hand, has always been a little bit of a cup-to-go town. Till fairly recently, there have been few upstarts trying to spring up in the shadow of Starbucks or Caribou Coffee. But that is changing, and now there is a new spate of cafes serving a truly special cup of coffee. Since July, three coffeehouses have sprung up in Washington: Mid City Caffè, Chinatown Coffee Co. and would-be chain Bourbon Coffee.

"I'd only just mentioned a month ago, on my last trip to D.C., that it was shocking to me how few independent coffee shops there were. This is the big trend in my own neighborhood in Brooklyn, despite the recession," says Trevor Butterworth, a former D.C. resident who visited both Mid City and Chinatown Coffee on a visit to Washington last month. "Cafes have always been integral to developing a cultural life. . . I'm really excited for the city."

Big Bear Cafe in Northwest (which eschews skim milk and doesn't stock artificial sweeteners) opened in 2007 and is among the trailblazers in this new coffee world, where baristas pull out timers to make just one perfect cup and everyone wants to talk about things like integrity of flavor.

"What we're doing is we're on the same level as the slow-food movement or the craft cocktail movement," says Lana Labermeir, co-owner of Big Bear.

She couldn't be more pleased about the new additions to the city's couture coffee movement. "It's wonderful not to be alone," she says.



Mid City Caffè

1626 14th St. NW, 202-234-1515,
<http://www.midcitycaffe.com>.

Try: a cappuccino, \$3.25.

After Sparky's Espresso Cafe closed in the summer of 2007, its neighbors on 14th Street mourned: Sparky's had toasted bagels and brewed coffee for weekend-morning crowds for years, and like Cafe Saint-Ex and Busboys and Poets, it was a symbol of the street's renaissance after decades of blight.

Mid City Caffè, which opened in an upper-level space Aug. 15, is filling the Sparky's void and then some. It serves drinks made with beans from cult North Carolina roaster Counter Culture Coffee, along with two house-made flavoring syrups (vanilla, made with sugar steeped with real vanilla bean; and a Nutella-based chocolate syrup for mochas and the like). An assortment of old-fashioned cakes (lime chiffon, spice) is as hunger-inducing as a Wayne Thiebaud painting.



But here's the thing: Mid City serves its coffee in a way that will require a little adjustment for those accustomed to Starbucks.

There is, for example, no coffeemaker here. Order a regular ol' coffee and you get two options: French press or pour-over. Either way, your beans are ground to order and then drenched in hot water just long enough to summon a strong, soul-warming cup of joe. If you

order an espresso, macchiato or cappuccino for the road, one of Mid City's baristas will tell you -- sympathetically but firmly -- they just can't do it.

"If you took an espresso to go, it'd be cold by the time you got to the bottom of the stairs," says owner Mick Mier. But don't take it as attitude; this is a cafe that implores you stay, sip, slow down -- this is a cafe with a "Stay Awhile" menu.

"I'm really excited. We needed an independent coffee shop in the neighborhood -- good music, good vibe," says Leah Wu, who was lingering over a newspaper and a glass of iced tea on a recent Sunday afternoon. "It's not Starbucks, which I appreciate. I know somebody local owns it, somebody put a lot of thought into it, and it's one of a kind."