

Respect the Bean!

Specialty coffee in Texas

Text by **JESSICA DUPUY**

I VIVIDLY REMEMBER MY FIRST taste of coffee, a bitter, face-scrunching sip stolen from my dad's Ducks Unlimited mug when I was five years old. But I also remember my *best* cup of coffee—a simple latte (espresso with steamed milk) from Austin's Caffé Medici—a velvety, nutty concoction that tasted of caramelized sugar, made all the more special by an ornate design of frothed milk. One eye-opening sip set the wheels in motion for an exploration of Texas' burgeoning specialty-coffee scene.

Austin alone is home to more than a half-dozen gourmet coffeehouses; my favorites include Caffé Medici, Houndstooth Coffee, Once Over, Juan Pelota Café, and Thunderbird Coffee. Dallas offers such specialty coffee spots as the Pearl Cup and Oddfellows, while in San Antonio, a place called Sip caters to downtown drinkers and Local Coffee serves crowds in the suburb of Stone Oak (and soon in Alamo Heights). And in Houston, there's a burgeoning specialty coffee scene led by such places as Down House and Greenway Coffee & Tea.

But what makes a good cup of coffee? I recently attended a barista-training course at the Austin roaster Cuvée Coffee, and I learned that there's more to specialty coffee than tossing a few scoops of grounds into a machine and pressing a button. First, know that when you order coffee drinks (lattes, cappuccinos, and americanos, for example), the majority of them are made



Do!

Discover the joys of java at your neighborhood coffeeshop

with *espresso*, which doesn't refer to the bean (or how dark it's roasted), but rather to the *process*. Espresso is a method of extraction using ground coffee beans, water, and a pressurized machine known as an espresso maker. Second, know that quality is about where the beans came from and how well they were handled before they made it to your cup, which means that coffeehouse owners have very close relationships with their roasters.

Take, for instance, Caffé Medici, where my own coffee journey began. Owner Michael Vaclav, who spent his college years in Austin learning about coffee at hangouts like JP's Java, later gained experience from such nationally acclaimed roasters as Chicago's Intelligentsia and

A marriage of flavor, aroma, creamy texture, and artful presentation elevate a classic cappuccino at Austin's Caffé Medici.

Durham's Counter Culture. Determined to open a shop that would put Austin on the specialty-coffee map, Vaclav formed a partnership with local coffee roaster Mike McKim of Cuvée Coffee, a company known for forging direct relationships with farmers in Africa and Central and South America. Vaclav opened Caffé Medici in 2006.

Since then, Vaclav has opened two more Caffé Medici locations, one on the University of Texas campus and one in the heart of downtown Austin. While each spot has its own distinct environment, I like the original spot on West Lynn for its warm, community-oriented vibe. Housed in a brown 1950s-style bungalow, Caffé Medici buzzes with whirs and hisses from the espresso machine, loud bursts from the coffee grinder, and the steady hum of neighborly chatter.

That's precisely the environment Robby Grubbs wanted to create for San Antonio's Local. Inspired by Medici's business model, Grubbs opened Local Coffee in San Antonio's Stone Oak suburb in 2010, and is currently in negotiations to open a second location in the city's Alamo Heights neighborhood. On any given Monday at 9:30 a.m., you're likely to find 70 people in the shop sipping coffee with friends, or

Specialty Coffee Shops

Most shops mentioned in this story have individual websites and/or Facebook pages that list locations, hours, and menus. Fire up your favorite search engine!

For details about **Caffé Medici** in **Austin**, see www.caffemedici.com.

For details about **Local Coffee** in **San Antonio**, see www.localcoffeesa.com.

For details about **Down House** in **Houston**, see www.downhousehouston.com.

To learn more about **Greenway Coffee & Tea** and the upcoming **Blacksmith Coffee Bar**, see www.greenwaycoffee.com, or check Blacksmith's Facebook page.



simply stopping in for a grab-and-go order.

And then there's coffee aficionado Chris Cusack, owner of Austin's Thunderbird Coffee, a popular hangout with two loca-

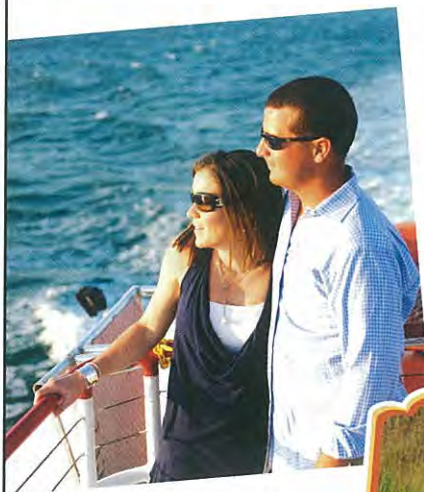
A transcendent cup of coffee depends on the skills of the growers, roasters, and the baristas who prepare it and serve it to you.

tions. Cusack, who grew up in Houston's Heights neighborhood, recently opened Down House not far from his childhood home, aiming for a community spot that

could serve as a coffeehouse, restaurant, and bar. "People are interested in value—not necessarily a bargain, but value for their time and money. We want to spend our money on quality."

"For us, it's about quality in everything we do," says Greenway Coffee & Tea owner David Buehrer, whose latest endeavor, Blacksmith Coffee Bar, is slated to open this spring on the rapidly evolving "lower Westheimer curve" of Houston's Montrose neighborhood. "If you like vanilla lattes from a large chain, we can make you a vanilla latte. But we're going to use local, unhomogenized milk, house-made natural syrup, and expertly roasted beans," he says. "It's going to be the best vanilla latte you've ever had. It's easy for me to talk for hours about different varieties and roasting techniques, but it's more meaningful to simply have people taste an excellent coffee. Our job is to respect the flavors of the bean and let you be the judge." **TH**

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