

THE QUALITY-COFFEE  
METAMORPHOSIS  
IN PRAGUE

**BUILDING**

BREW-HEMIA



BY JOANN PLOCKOVA

double shot

For decades, Café Savoy got along just fine without worrying much about fine-tuned roast profiles or the nuances of extraction. The elegant institution has stood since the late-19th century, a stone's throw from the Vltava River near the center of Prague, and it serves as a pillar of the Czech Republic capital's café culture. Last year, however, the café began using coffee from local specialty roaster Doubleshot, a noteworthy shift at the heart of a café community that has long focused more on atmosphere than flavor notes.



**CAFÉ SAVOY:** The shop has stood since the 19th century but recently made a push toward quality coffee.

Café Savoy's move put it in line with a growing number of Prague cafés and restaurants transitioning toward high-quality coffee service. It's a movement that's gaining momentum, with local roasters like Doubleshot and La Boheme Café leading the way alongside pour-over-loving cafés and hip educational venues.

The result is a burgeoning specialty coffee scene that is uniquely Czech: Fresh-thinking upstarts are blending with long-established coffee spots and building off of entrenched consumer tastes. The influence of renowned roasters from other parts of Europe and even the United States is also playing a role as Bohemia turns its eyes toward better brews.

## SPECIALTY IN ITS INFANCY

The Czech Republic's current coffee scene is tied to the arrival of Italian influence. In the wake of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, which led to the fall of the Communist party in then-Czechoslovakia, Italians made a strong presence. "After the revolution, Italian companies completely took over the coffee market, importing espresso blends," says Jaroslav Tucek, co-owner of Doubleshot.

He says most Czech cafés in the 1990s and early-2000s operated on a contract system—common in much of Europe then—in which those Italian companies would provide free equipment and charge high prices for coffee that many deemed low-quality. To help create an environment of better brews, Prague roasters started rejecting cafés and restaurants asking for these sorts

of partnerships. "Companies were used to this [system] so they expected it from us," says Tucek. Slowly, Prague-based roasters convinced shops to invest in higher-quality machines, which in turn showed the roasters which outlets were willing to give better coffee a chance.

Still, in the mid-2000s, many consumers viewed specialty coffee as something of an anomaly. "In the beginning ... no one was interested in freshly roasted Czech coffee," says Tucek. "They saw Italian coffee as the only quality coffee. No one knew what specialty coffee [meant]. We actually had to come up with a term." They settled on *vyberova kava*, which roughly translates to "select coffee."

But getting better coffee in retail spaces and creating a lexicon in which to differentiate the product was only half the battle. The quality-minded operators then had to take on the beverage traditions that were part of consumer culture. The standard drink was *Cesky Turek*, a Czech take on Turkish coffee. To make it, hot water is added directly to coffee grounds—and generally creates a burnt-and-bitter taste profile. "Central Europe has a different taste in coffee," says Daniel Kolsky, owner of another Prague roaster, Mama Coffee. At the onset of the movement, he adds, most Czech consumers were averse to acidity, a key component in quality brews.

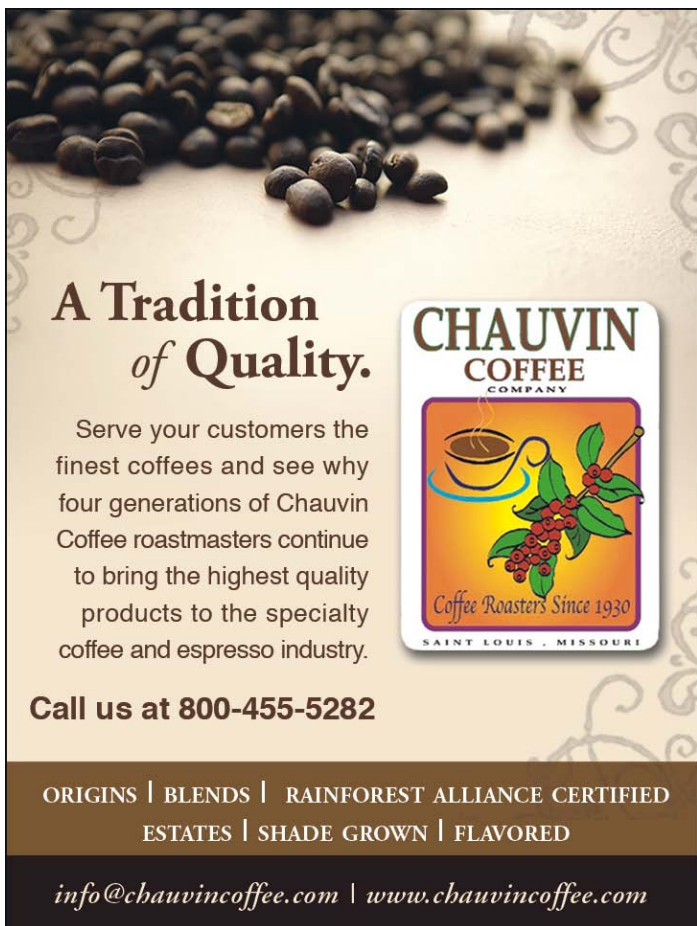
## PIONEERING ROASTERS

Strangely enough, a key moment in the development of Czech coffee occurred in Brooklyn. It was there that an American named Charles Fler, who had spent 1999 to 2001 living in Prague, made a French press in his kitchen and an idea came to him: Why not return to the Czech capital and start a specialty roaster? His epiphany came in 2002 when Italians still controlled much of Prague's coffee industry. Before heading back, Fler broadened his knowledge by meeting with coffee farmers as well as some leaders in the U.S. coffee industry: "I started cupping with George Howell," he says.

The result was La Boheme Café, which Tucek of Doubleshot calls Prague's "first specialty coffee roaster" and "the start of the specialty coffee movement in the Czech Republic." Fler didn't get the roastery built until 2007, and he launched the company in 2008. "The concept from the start was to bring the highest-quality coffees to the Czech Republic and Central Europe," he says, adding that he planned to "roast them on demand for freshness and supply them to the consumer at an honest price." Today La Boheme specializes in providing for high-end restaurants, hotels and cafés. The company nets 50 percent of its sales from the Czech market, with the rest coming from a number of other surrounding nations.

Also in the crop of specialty roasters breaking through around the time of La Boheme's emergence were Coffee Source and Mama Coffee. Coffee Source, headed by Tomas Hudec and Petr Kostal, began in 2003 as a wholesaler and started roasting in 2008. Mama Coffee, meanwhile, brought the first fair-trade

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**MAMA COFFEE:** The roaster was the first in Prague to offer fair-trade-certified coffee.

coffee to Prague as well as a more civic-minded approach, working with NGOs and community organizations. Selling wholesale and also at the retail level, Mama Coffee now operates several branded cafés, differentiating each location based on the particular neighborhood it's located in. It recently launched a café featuring a brand dubbed Original Coffee, which focuses on small lots with unique flavor profiles.

La Boheme also helped breed a number of individuals who would expand the scene, including Doubleshot's Tucek and Jarda Hrstka. The pair started Doubleshot in 2010 after acquiring separate coffee knowledge: Tucek, along with third partner and operations manager Kamila Sotonova, spent a year visiting farms and working with Graciano Cruz, owner of Panama's celebrated coffee farm Los Lajones Estate. Meanwhile, Hrstka spent a year working with Canada's 49th Parallel Coffee Roasters.

### CHANGED LANDSCAPE

While small roasters have helped lead Prague's shift toward better coffee, they point out that their efforts alone aren't the whole story—some credit must go to consumers themselves, whose openness gave new coffee concepts a chance. "Czechs are pretty much interested in anything new," notes Kolsky of Mama Coffee. Roasters say that consumers have been remarkably receptive to educational efforts—the acidity issue is a good example. "To differentiate from the word *kyselost*, which is the same word for both sourness and acidity, we introduced the word *acidita*," says Flerer of La Boheme. "The definition is very similar to wine, so people can understand their coffee is not sour, it just has some acidity."

La Boheme and the majority of other specialty roasters



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have at one time or another offered public tastings, and all provide a wealth of information via their Web sites, blogs and in cafés. Consumers demonstrated their interest last year when Mama Coffee hosted the first Prague Coffee Festival. Kolsky expected around 600 attendees, but more than 3,000 came through the doors. “It shows a huge demand for information about specialty coffee,” he says. Along with workshops, presentations and discussions, the event gave palate-aware consumers the chance to taste coffees from cafés around the

Czech Republic as well as 100 specialty coffees from Czech roasters and several abroad. “It was a really interesting opportunity to compare certain coffees,” Kolsky says. “These are coffees people are not used to drinking every day.”

Also in attendance were several coffee experts and educators, including Petra Vesela, Czech’s two-time national barista champion. Vesela is playing a significant role in educating the Czech public about specialty coffee: She recently published a book on the subject, and she offers public courses teaching coffee preparation to baristas of varying skill levels. In the same vein, Kavovy Klub (which translates to Coffee Club), led by well-known baristas Adam Dvorak and Zdenek Smrcka, offers workshops, courses and catering with the goal, in the words of Smrcka, “to improve coffee culture in the Czech Republic.”

## IN THE CAFÉ

These growing legions of educated customers are helping to support Prague’s increasingly vibrant café scene. Doubleshot runs a shop under the name Muj Salek Kavy (My Cup of Tea); Tucek says the offerings there include “more conservative” blends and then “something crazy” on a second grinder. “Those who know us will try this [latter coffee] and others will start with the more conservative blend and then gradually make their way to different coffees,” he says. On a monthly basis, the shop changes its three filtered coffee offerings along with the brew method, an approach that a number of shops have employed in hopes of showing consumers that anyone can craft a great cup. “This was our business model from the

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**PRAGUE'S THIRD WAVE:** Roaster Doubleshot (left) operates the café Muj Salek Kavy with varying coffees and brew methods, while Café Lounge (right) rotates coffees from roasters around the world.

beginning: to introduce a high-quality coffee to the home user without them needing to buy expensive super-automatic espresso machines,” says Tucek.

Another quality-focused spot in Prague is Café Lounge, which has adopted a multiple-roaster concept that pays homage to great roasters worldwide. “Our main coffee is from [London-based] Union,” says Café Lounge owner Kamil Skrbek. “The second and third coffee of the week—usually a second espresso and one filtered coffee—we usually offer from a guest roastery, either from the Czech Republic or another country in Europe.” And from time to time, Skrbek says, “somebody brings some coffee from the U.S.”—Intelligentsia, Stumptown and Verve have passed through Café Lounge’s grinders.

A different sort of café is the year-old Prazirna, the first of Prague’s specialty coffee shops to feature an in-house roastery. “I have never seen a café [in the Czech Republic] with a three-kilo roaster,” says Vanda Zumrova, the shop’s owner, “only smaller sample-sized roasters.” The former barista champ Smrcka works the bar at Prazirna, which serves high-scoring coffees from green coffee importers Mare Terra in Spain and the United Kingdom’s Mercanta. “We are too small to have coffee directly from farmers,” says Zumrova, who adds that business is growing in part because the scene is developing. “There are many new cafés and people are interested in the preparation,” she says. “They [no longer] want to have dark, bitter coffee, which they don’t know where it has come from.”

## A PLACE WITH PROMISE

Once a consumer gets to know Prague’s specialty scene, the growth and buzz within it seem impressive, but most quality roasters in town are quick to note how their community still drifts below the radar. “An awareness has been created amongst a small group of coffee appreciators, but the mass market—still mainly a commodity market—is a challenge,” says Fleer of La Boheme Café.

Still, there are plenty of signs the evolution is set to continue. Doubleshot, in addition to expanding its warehouse with more storage space, plans to open a training center to meet the demand for barista instruction. Café Lounge is opening a new espresso bar, while Mama Coffee, Coffee Source and La Boheme (which recently moved to a larger roasting facility after outgrowing its previous location) are investing in additional or larger roasters this year. La Boheme and Mama Coffee also are eyeing opportunities outside of the Czech Republic, though they’re reticent to discuss details as those plans are still coming together.

Prague in many ways seems to be following in the footsteps of some notable neighbors across Europe. “I think in a few years it will be like London or Berlin,” says Tucek of Doubleshot. “Two years ago in Berlin there were just a few cafés—now there are 15 or 20. Hopefully Prague will be the same.” With longstanding institutions like Café Savoy having made the transition toward specialty coffee, it seems the city is on its way. ☪