

Coffee Lovers of Moscow See the Light at the End of the Tunnel

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March 28, 2013



Coffee has gotten more sophisticated in Russia since the days when it was made from a rye-based substitute. **Vladimir Filonov**

Coffee culture is relatively new in Russia. Back in the Soviet Union, you were lucky if you managed to get your hands on some instant coffee. Otherwise, you had to make do with some rye-based coffee substitute, "Bely Medved" (Polar Bear) being the ubiquitous brand. And, in a rather unpromising turn of events, Nescafe quickly captured the market after the USSR's collapse and became almost synonymous with coffee.

Coffee culture had a revival in the late 90's when the first coffee chains opened and started expanding. More than a decade, later the quality of coffee drinks in the Russian capital still leaves much to be desired, but things have gotten much better.

Below are my humble and by no means exhaustive observations about some of the coffee chains and independent coffee shops available in Moscow.

Coffee House and Shokoladnitsa — drinks at these two oldest coffee chains, both of which have an international presence, have the rare distinction of being simultaneously overpriced and horrible. That's a definite no-go. Unless, of course, it's the only place you can go, which is often the case as these two chains are pretty much present on every block.

Coffee Bean — one of the oldest chains and still going strong. Coffee Bean has only a couple of locations, having preferred the quality of their drinks over expansion. Apart from an impressive list of specialty drinks, they can also boast of the friendliest staff and the best desserts.

Starbucks — although a relative newcomer, it already feels like a permanent fixture on the Moscow coffee scene. But if you're looking for the same run-of-the-mill quality Starbucks is known for the world over, you might be in for a surprise. The service is friendlier and the female baristas prettier (it is Moscow after all), but the price tag is twice what it is in the U.S. and most of Europe. The quality is middling at best and some of those pretty baristas have very little idea of how to operate a sophisticated espresso machine.

Coffee Mania — probably one of the few places in the world where a cappuccino costs more than ten dollars. It's actually worth it though since it's the absolute best coffee in town. The economics of it, of course, are a different matter entirely.

Arctic Coffee — a brand new chain, which apart from your regular array of espresso-based drinks serves a specialty coffee called "arctic." It's brewed with beans excavated from under a thick layer of permafrost in the northern Siberia. As scientists have recently discovered, before the latest ice age, this whole area was tropics and coffee groves covered a considerable part of it.

Red Espresso — probably the fastest growing coffee chain with outposts all over the city, including the trendy Gorky Park. It belongs to an Israeli company that also owns Aroma Espresso Bar in Israel and New York City. Cappuccinos are great here, but the quality is not consistent and the service can be quite slow.

Kofein — started out as a relatively inexpensive donut and coffee chain, but after rebranding it became one more premium coffee chain with prices almost as high as those at Coffee Mania. Kofein first started serving coffee drinks prepared by unorthodox methods, such as chemex and aero press.

Zerno i List (Bean and Leaf), also known as Specialty Coffee Academy, is tucked away in a squat-like courtyard of the Kitai-Gorod neighborhood (7 Khokhlovsky Pereulok) and probably has the cheapest cappuccino in town, a really good one at that! It's the only place in Moscow where the prices are comparable to those in the West, with a cappuccino costing about \$4. The seating space is very limited so be prepared to drink your coffee standing. The Academy also roasts its own beans, which you can purchase at its store.

Double B Coffee and Tea — right now it is just a curtained-off section of the Mandarin Combustible restaurant (2 Ulitsa Malaya Cherkasskaya). Double B stands for Babushka Batman (Granny Batman) and is a new project by one of the founders of Kofein. It's a coffee gourmand's paradise, serving two types of espresso, all the regular espresso-based drinks plus filtered coffee of different origins (that can also be prepared in a chemex, hario or aero

press). If that wasn't enough, they make their own macarons and offer an extensive tea menu. Let's hope there will be more places like Double B, and the sooner the better!

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