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Cup after cup: From Otherlands to Comeback to the Anti Gentrification Coffee Club

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Hayes McPherson pours a latte at Comeback Coffee on Nov. 1, 2022. (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian)

A generation ago, before Starbucks landed in Memphis, there were maybe a couple of coffee shops in town, maybe none if you go all the way back to 1990, before Java Cabana opened its doors in Cooper-Young.

Today, there are roughly 30 local coffee shops, depending on how narrowly you define the term, and that doesn't include the many Starbucks and various coffee carts, trucks and kiosks around.

At Kinfolk breakfast, big biscuits are only the beginning

If the Memphis coffee community is now ever-growing, a big portion of it will come together this weekend for the Grind City Coffee Xpo, which is being held at the Downtown location of Wiseacre Brewing on Saturday, Nov. 5, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

“It’s just coffee everywhere,” said Xpo organizer Daniel Lynn. “We’re going to have 18 different vendors, the biggest one we’ve had yet.”

Among those vendors are more than half a dozen local coffee shops, who will be offering up samples and doing demonstrations on pour overs, cold brews, coffee sodas and other treatments.



Otherlands Coffee Bar customers sit enjoy a quiet cup of Joe on Monday, Oct. 31, 2022. (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

View Gallery

The Xpo is a by-product of the city's recent coffee boom.

“We want the guests to be able to come out of the Xpo more educated about coffee in general. That's one of the goals,” Lynn said. “And in bringing (vendors) all together under one roof, not only can they talk to guests and answer questions, but hang with each other. It's a way to build an even bigger community and grow it in a positive way.”

Over the next three weeks, The Daily Memphian will be delving into this growing community, taking a wide-ranging glimpse at the variety of coffee-shop options in Memphis today, starting this week with our [Downtown Memphis coffee shop guide](#).

And with this deeper look at three local shops that help tell the story of how the coffee-shop scene in Memphis has grown and evolved.

The essence of Midtown

Perhaps no Memphis coffee shop so fully embodies a specific place as Midtown's Otherlands Coffee Bar.

As Cooper-Young and Overton Square grow towards each other, they may end up meeting in the middle of Cooper Street at Otherlands, as many Midtowners have for nearly 30 years.

The modern story of the Memphis coffee shop starts along this path, where Cooper-Young's Java Cabana got there first and Otherlands, which opened in 1994, followed soon after.



Otherlands Coffee Bar owner Karen Lebovitz stands outside her shop on South Cooper on Monday, Oct. 31, 2022. (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

Where Java Cabana feels like Cooper-Young’s living room, the comparatively sprawling, multi-room Otherlands feels like the living room, sun room, reading nook, back porch and community message board for Midtown writ large.

It began as a futon store, with owner Karen Lebovitz setting up her futons on the current building’s south end. She wanted a co-tenant on the north side, and thought the neighborhood was missing something, an idea she got from working at Midtown natural foods store Squash Blossom.

“There was an eatery in the back and people just hung out there,” Lebovitz said of Squash Blossom. “But it wasn’t really a hang out, and I was getting into this mindset that people needed a place (for that).”

Lebovitz’s first barista collaborators were social workers who specialized in troubled youth, and that bled into the shop’s initial clientele.

“A little coffee, a little advice. It was wild the way the whole thing evolved,” Liebowitz said.

Entrepreneur brings feel of home to Cooper-Young restaurant

“At that point, we didn’t have the technology we have now and people just went and hung out and met each other. People were writing about this phenomenon as ‘third places.’ You had home, you had work and you had the place you hung out. Within two years, the business was really strong. The place had taken off and a lot of people came here every day to talk and drink coffee.

A few decades later, if Otherlands’ core clientele could be labeled “Midtown,” the description gets no more narrow. It’s a generation-spanning cohort, from high-schoolers to retirees.

“That was my vision, that every age of person comes in here and that people would be comfortable here,” Lebovitz said. “And it totally happened. People come, they conspire, they create.”

Otherlands Coffee Bar is at 641 Cooper St.

A destination shop in the Pinch District

If Otherlands embodies the first generation of local Memphis coffee shops, Comeback Coffee embodies the more recent boom.

It’s located Downtown, which has the city’s highest concentration of shops. The owners are young and inspired by coffee experiences elsewhere. As a specialty shop, it’s coffee-forward in a way connoisseurs appreciate. And it’s tapped into what’s not only a growing coffee scene in Memphis but a culinary one.

Comeback Coffee was opened by Hayes and Amy McPherson in 2019, in an old, underused Pinch District building.



Hayes and Amy McPherson pose for a portrait opened Comeback Coffee in an old, unused building in the Pinch District. (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian)

A couple since high school, Hayes and Amy went to college together at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, where Hayes had an off-campus job as a barista and Amy, a graphic design student, was a coffee-shop camper. They returned home with the idea of opening a shop together.

In the Pinch, they're a few blocks from the Bass Pro Pyramid, which doesn't send much traffic their way, and a few blocks from St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, whose relatively enclosed campus is encouragingly expanding south.

But there's still not much foot traffic along this northern end of Main Street.

"Everyone thought we were insane to open this here," Amy McPherson said.

And yet Comeback Coffee seems to always be busy, weekdays and weekends.

Inked: Construction begins on BluffCakes in Germantown, second Scooter's Coffee location

If it's a neighborhood coffee shop still waiting for a neighborhood to come along, it's also become something of a destination.

"People definitely drive here, to be here, which is cool," Amy said.

What do they come for?

An elevated coffee presentation in a beautiful old space of light wood and exposed brick. High-quality food partnerships, such as the Kinfolk breakfast pop-up on weekends and specialty donuts from Artesanal De Tela many Sundays. But also comfortable furniture and a friendly, unpretentious vibe. The shop's Wi-Fi password, lit up in neon across the north wall, tells the tale: "Stay Awhile."

"There's a fine line," Hayes McPherson said. "There are shops that feel really good and you want to hang out for hours on end, but the coffee isn't that good. You're just there for the caffeine and the hang. On the flip side, with specialty coffee, there are a lot of places that do coffee really well, but you may not be able to hang there that long. Sometimes that's intentional."

Cookies and pastries take Sound Bites to a sweet sugar high

"We wanted to do both, and I think we've done a pretty good job. We're not perfect at all, but we feel good about it."

Comeback has built connections to the specialty coffee scene in Memphis and beyond. A multi-roaster, they're mostly using smaller-batch beans from roasters around the country and overseas right now.

"There are plenty of places in Memphis now where you can get local coffee, either because the roasters have their own shops or they're supplying other shops," Hayes said. "We wanted to showcase cool things that are happening in this industry from

people who are doing it well, which means a mindset of quality and also relationship-based business (practices). Folks who are working with coffee farmers, communicating with them and paying them a full wage. All of that plays into the one cup of coffee we sell in the shop.”

One thing you will find at Comeback that you won't find even at most specialty shops: Home-brewed coffee soda, which has become a growth industry for the business.

“We started playing with recipes before we started Comeback, and we launched it when we launched the shop,” Amy said.

New Eats: Blanchard's new patisserie trailer a good way to start the day

Back then, the soda was on-tap. When COVID hit, they started canning it, initially by hand. Now they're stocking their canned coffee sodas at some other shops around town and are building out a manufacturing space two doors down, the front of which will be a public greenroom for The Golden Hour, the next-door plant shop that Amy McPherson co-owns with another partner.

“Once the space is finished, we can begin trying to push (the sodas) more outside of Memphis,” Hayes McPherson said.

This weekend, on the eve of Saturday's Grind City Xpo, Comeback will serve as a clubhouse for the Memphis specialty coffee scene, opening Friday night for the Grind City Throwdown pre-party.

“The Xpo is special to us for a few reasons,” Hayes said. “It's good to see coffee being pushed heavy in Memphis. But we kind of launched ourselves at the first Xpo (in 2019). That's where we debuted the soda and the coffee community first saw us.”

Comeback Coffee is at 358 N. Main St.

The taste and the movement

If the Grind City Xpo helped launch Comeback Coffee, Comeback helped launch Cxffeeblack, which debuted its locally roasted Guji Mane beans at a launch event at Comeback.

This weekend, Cxffeeblack founders Maurice Henderson II, who mostly goes by his hip-hop moniker Bartholomew Jones, and his wife Renata Henderson, will be back at Comeback, helping judge the latte art competition at Friday's Grind City Throwdown.

Jones and his crew now reside at the Anti Gentrification Coffee Club, in the Heights, a neighborhood off Summer Avenue in northeast Memphis.



Bartholomew Jones operates Anti Gentrification Coffee Club on National Street. (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

Before the club, there was Guji Mane, now also a canned flash-chilled cold brew. Before Guji Mane, there was Cxffeeblack. And what is that?

“A movement,” said Jones, an educator, hip-hop artist and coffee enthusiast who’s brought all three together in the form of Cxffeeblack.

Cxffeeblack and the Anti Gentrification Coffee Club embody an emerging new chapter in a Memphis coffee scene that has been largely white — not just in terms of clientele, but in terms of neighborhood location and ownership — in a majority Black city.

“We kind of started with a question: “What would it look like if coffee had never been stolen from Africa? If there were a Black coffee culture, what would it look like?” Jones asked.

Jones describes a culture estranged from something that, at root, came from within, from Ethiopia specifically, and taken around the world via colonialism.

Starbucks loses appeal; must take Memphis 7 back

“The coffee industry as we know it is the direct result of West African slaves brought to Brazil to grow it,” Jones said. “Even the expectation of coffee being cheap, which is so synonymous in our minds, is a result of it being built on the slave labor of West Africans in Brazil.

“That’s the historical context. The current context, for most Black and brown folks in this city and around the country, is that your introduction to specialty coffee is through a shop coming to your neighborhood and gentrifying it. There’s an expectation that you won’t see too many Black faces in these spaces.”

Cxffeeblack has roots in music Jones made about his interest in coffee and then apparel and other merchandise that really took off, proclaiming “Love Black people like you love black cxffee” and “Make cxffee black again.”

For Guji Mane, Jones and Henderson forged an all-Black supply chain using Ethiopian beans, with Henderson now the city’s only Black female coffee roaster, having learned the trade in part from early partner Ethnos Coffee Roasters.

And the Anti Gentrification Coffee Club — notably a “club” not a shop — is their response to building a coffee-focused space that centers and welcomes Black people broadly and its neighborhood specifically.

‘It’s a great day for justice’: Last of the Memphis Starbucks 7 return to work

Opened last December, in partnership with the Heights Community Development Corporation, the Coffee Club took some persuading for Jones.

“People had told me like 20 times that I needed to open a coffee shop, but I was really worried it was going to gentrify the neighborhood,” Jones said. “I live two blocks from here. I didn’t have a model for the type of shop that I thought would be culturally congruent for my community.”

What he came up with is a space envisioned more as a “community living room,” which isn’t a description much different from lots of other shops, except this is a different community, and one reflected on both sides of the counter. It’s a space both reflective of its neighborhood and, crucially, protective of it.

“In poor Black neighborhoods in the South, the neighborhood coffee shop isn’t really a thing,” according to Jones. “Most of the time if someone starts a coffee shop in a Black neighborhood it’s because the real estate’s cheap, and then you’re gonna bring in a bunch of people from other places. And that’s great. They live in the city, too. But we need a space for our community to be comfortable.”

Soon, as Jones and his Heights development partners plan it, that will be even more space, as the Coffee Club looks to relocate in the next year or so to a larger, two-story location a block north, where Jones and Henderson can bring their coffee-roasting operation in-house and expand their Heights-centric third space both inside and — crucial for the neighborhood kids — outside.

Anti Gentrification Coffee Club is at 761 National St.

Coffee's about the roast and the brew, sure. But coffee shops — or clubs — are about their communities, the ones they represent or the ones they create.

Memphis has never had so many — or so varied — places to grab a cup.

TOPICS

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