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Third Wave of Coffee Brings Quality to Moscow

By Timothy Misir

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Service with a smile: One Black Coffee Cooperative backer tending the pop-up stand at this year's Avant-Fest.

A good cup of coffee is hard to come by for connoisseurs in the Russian capital.

"The coffee scene in Moscow is quite bad, at least all the places I've tried," said Filip Mayer, an architect from Sweden who drinks about five cups daily. "There is a lack of small places with cheap and good espresso, ideally along the street, where one can watch what's going on while you have your coffee."

In Moscow, one is often limited to cheap, low-quality black coffee from kiosks or a pricey cup from one of several chain cafes. But the Third Wave of Coffee, a movement that aims to produce high-quality coffee through artisanal sourcing, roasting and blending of beans, is slowly gaining traction in the city.

Aided by the growing demand for higher-quality beans and an appreciation of alternative brewing methods, a new generation of coffee enthusiasts is transforming coffee culture in the city, and a burgeoning speciality coffee scene is beginning to develop.

Daniel Sokolov, the owner of Zharim Coffee, a speciality coffee bean distributor based in Moscow, lamented that "everyone likes coffee, but they don't know what it really is about."

In Sokolov's opinion, this is a result of Russians having been brought up on poor-quality and instant coffee.

He said he was inspired on a recent trip to London, during which he visited the London Coffee Festival, where he realized that there is a lot more room for improvement in Moscow, especially in the availability of high-quality beans.

Instead of opening a cafe, he instead wanted to use his experience in Internet retail — he is the co-founder of group-discount site boombate.com — to provide beans that are closely monitored in both quality and production to people who like to enjoy a cup at home.

Last week, Zharim Coffee began rolling out a subscription service, offering coffee beans delivered twice monthly to subscribers to ensure they are freshly roasted, with three different varieties in each shipment. They also aim to educate the public on artisanal and speciality coffee through "cupping," or coffee-tasting sessions.

Katerina Antanyevich, a co-owner of Black Coffee Cooperative, said the low demand for speciality coffee and alternative brewing methods is due to a lack of awareness. However, this is changing, with consumers increasingly seeing coffee as an artisanal foodstuff.

The face of slow-coffee culture in Moscow, Black Coffee Cooperative is the only place that exclusively focuses on slow-brewing methods such as the Aeropress and V60, offering freshly brewed cups of coffee from 104 rubles (just over $3).

Katerina explained that they wanted to start a business where, through their operation, they could positively affect the lives of both their producers and consumers. As coffee culture in Moscow was still in its infancy, it was the perfect opportunity for them.

A project between five friends, the co-owners take pride in the fact that their business is a cooperative in every sense of the word. They share all the costs and responsibilities of the operation equally, and publish their costs, assets and liabilities in full on their website every month.

Explaining the process by which they operate, Antanyevich said their beans are imported from a Norwegian distributor and freshly roasted in Moscow. They remain fully aware of, and in control of, every stage of the production process, from what the farmers are paid, to the height of the plants their beans are harvested from.

Though still not a profitable operation, their project is more about the development of a culture of "responsible consumption" and the building of a community around which they operate, Antanyevich, said. They have already organized lectures on slow coffee culture, and on the business model of cooperatives.

A regular fixture at food markets this summer, they have opened a permanent kiosk at Novaya Ploshchad, sharing a space with DiG!, a record shop, and the bookstore Tsiolkovsky. Though the space they currently occupy is small and standing-room only, they are currently looking to move to a new location together with their co-tenants, as the building they are located in is slated for redevelopment.

When asked about what his ideal coffee outlet would be like, Mayer said: "It should have an affordable and tasty product and friendly staff. Those two are the only things necessary for a successful place. Charging $5 for an espresso will never achieve this. Neither will special decor or any type of image."

With its humble image, emphasis on quality and utilitarian attitude, it seems that Black Coffee Cooperative has all the right boxes ticked.

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