

As you're strolling through the streets of the Strip District on any given morning, there is no shortage of coffee shops, cafes, or coffee roasters to satiate your daily coffee intake and get you revved up for the rest of the day.

"Coffee is still very popular these days and everybody is drinking it," says Paula Olszewski, owner of Fortunes Coffee Roastery, between 20th and 21st streets across from Pennsylvania Macaroni. "We are fortunate that we have enough walk-in traffic. Many of our customers keep returning because we have good quality coffee and they have a variety to pick from."

Olszewski purchased Fortunes from the original family three years ago. Fortunes has been in the Strip for over 50 years, started by the Fortunes family. The place was strictly a wholesale business until 28 years ago, when the daughter of the owner opened the retail store. Because of its storied history, Olszewski decided to retain the name. "Mr. Fortunes had a fabulous



Paula Olszewski of Fortunes

reputation down here and we felt that it was important to keep the name," says Olszewski.

Olszewski credits a certain Seattle-based coffee

establishment for the popularity of coffee. "Coffee drinking has changed dramatically over the past decade because of places like Starbucks," she says. "I'm not sure if they have the best quality, but they have brilliant marketing, so people have learned that all coffee is not just Maxwell House Columbian. They have learned that there are different characteristics to it and different qualities."

Finding a Great Cup of Coffee in the Strip

By Daniel Casciato

Like other successful businesses in the Strip, La Prima Espresso on 21st Street is dependent on that foot traffic trekking up and down the sidewalks. "It's nice to be part of that regular routine of someone's life," says Sam Patti, owner of La Prima Espresso. "A coffee shop is like an oasis where we can go, decompress, relax, and meet wonderful people. It gets you away from the rigors of life."

Patti opened La Prima in 1988 as a showroom selling and servicing commercial espresso machines. Seven years later, he felt that Pittsburghers were ready for a coffee bar and began serving espresso and cappuccinos. Today, his coffee-roasting business focuses on relationship coffee—which is when one roaster buys an entire crop of coffee from a farm. This enables farmers to receive a better-than-fair-trade price for their coffee by eliminating the need for coffee brokers or other middlemen.

"We're happy to do that because by selling certified fair trade organic coffee, it allows people to think about the environment and

farmers, and help to sustain the farmers and Mother Earth," says Patti.

Jim Robinson, owner of Leaf & Bean, a coffee and cigar shop on 2200 Penn Avenue, says that the average American today is much more sophisticated when it comes to coffee than he or she was a decade or two ago. "Long gone are the days of foil-sealed, large tins of coffee," he says. "Now more people know about the subtle differences



Leaf & Bean

between countries of origin, roasts, and blends. That can actually make it quite difficult to keep up with these coffee connoisseurs."

Robinson adds that consumers are also increasingly European in their coffee tastes. "We probably sell just as many lattes, macchiatos, and

Continued ▶



Coffee in the Strip

espresso shots as we do plain old cups of joe,” he says. “Customers come to the shop with refined palates and a keen knowledge of how they like their drinks—skinny, wet, dry, less foam, more foam, with syrups or without. It’s a challenge keeping up, but it’s a challenge my whole staff and I enjoy living up to. Overall, people expect their coffee to provide more than just a jolt of caffeine to get them through their long, lazy afternoon.”

According to Stan PrestoGeorge, owner of PrestoGeorge Coffee at 1719 Penn Avenue, coffee hasn’t always had the cachet it has today. “It was always considered a staple, but it’s now moving toward being a luxury item, kind of like a fine wine,” he says, adding that customers are much more knowledgeable about their coffee and tea. “People really have dialed into the type of coffee they want; they talk to and learn from



Photo by In-Vision Studio

Stan PrestoGeorge

their roaster,” he says. “As a result, they are willing to pay a little bit more despite the poor economy.”

When customers walk into his business, PrestoGeorge usually tries to determine their coffee preferences—for

Continued on p. 42 ▶

An advertisement for Lidia's Pittsburgh. It features a smiling woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white chef's uniform with a red collar and a red button. She is pointing her right hand towards the left. In the upper left corner, there is a single red tomato. The text "Now Open Seven Days a Week!" is written in a cursive font. Below the tomato is a circular logo with "PITTSBURGH" at the top, "LIDIA'S" in the center, and "ITALY" at the bottom. In the bottom right corner, there is a black box with white text providing the restaurant's address, phone number, and website.

Now Open
Seven Days a Week!

PITTSBURGH
LIDIA'S
ITALY

Lidia's Pittsburgh
1400 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, PA
For Reservations: 412.552.0150
www.lidiasitaly.com

Coffee in the Strip

Continued from p. 12

example, are they looking for something heavy or something smooth? “If customers are not sure what they are looking for—depending on how receptive they are to answering our questions—we try to hone in on the exact type of coffee they are seeking,” he says. “Our ultimate goal is for them to come back. We ask a number of different questions and make sure the grind is right.”

For all of these coffee shop owners, the Strip District has proven to be a great location. PrestoGeorge enjoys the area because of its central proximity to the city as well as the diversity of people who stop by his establishment. “The Strip District has a unique flavor to it,” he says. “You have your regulars who come in all of the time, but it’s also a tourist attraction. Not only do we get people who come in weekly for their coffee, but we get a huge influx of people who have never been in the Strip before. For us, that makes it a lot of fun.”

For Robinson, the union between the Strip and the Leaf & Bean was a match made in heaven. “One look at our shop and it’s easy to see that it’s different from just about any other cigar shop in the world,” he says. “Our décor, atmosphere, and concept are nearly irreplaceable. I think the exact same thing can be said for the Strip District. There are few places in the world so alive and vibrant than the Strip on a bright, sunny day. Excitement and energy electrify the air in a way that no strip mall, shopping center, or suburban enclave will ever be able to replicate.”

Being located in the Strip has also been a boon to a coffee bar like 21st Street Coffee and Tea. “The Strip is a good representation of what the city of Pittsburgh is all about,” says Luke Shaffer, who started 21st Street Coffee and Tea, along with his wife, Alexis, five years ago. “I like being surrounded by other quality-focused, locally owned small businesses that care about their products and customers. We all complement each other very well.”

For instance, Shaffer says that there are many places where you can get a great sandwich, so his cafe doesn’t have to think about offering sandwiches. “We get to focus on what we do well, which is brewing coffee, one cup at a time,” he says. “We are happy to recommend to customers all of the other fine shops that are around here.”



21st Street Coffee and Tea

One of Shaffer’s greatest joys is seeing the surprise on his customers’ faces when they have a sip of his coffee. “They thought it might be a regular, boring cup of coffee, but they get something that blows their mind, and then big smiles cross their faces,” says Shaffer. “It makes them happy, and that makes us feel good. We’re in the business of making people happy with drinks.”

For more information on these coffee businesses, visit their websites: PrestoGeorge: www.prestoGeorge.com ... La Prima Espresso: www.laprima.com ... Fortunes Coffee Roastery: www.fortunescoffee.com ... 21st Street Coffee and Tea: www.21streetcoffee.com ... Leaf & Bean: www.leafandbeanstrip.com.



Daniel Casciato is a full-time freelance writer and social media specialist from Pittsburgh. In addition to writing for *The Strip!*, he writes health, legal, real estate, and technology-related articles for trade and consumer magazines and has his own copywriting business. His website is www.danielcasciato.com.
