



Food & Wine

## America's Best Boutique Coffees

Rebecca Ruiz, 04.08.08, 1:30 PM ET

The rushed business traveler rarely has to worry about where to find a cup of coffee. That's because Starbucks is now ever-present in most cities. Add to the mix thousands of McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts locations now serving improved brews and the options are endless.

What's more difficult to find is the unique cup: the single-origin espresso or freshly roasted French press. Even though **Starbucks**, in its fight to retain customers, today unveiled a new brewing strategy and an inaugural blend called Pike Place Roast, most coffee snobs argue that the best java is found at small cafes where each cup is painstakingly crafted. Often tucked away in neighborhoods outside of a city's financial district, these shops can be difficult to get to for a business traveler, but aficionados say it's a worthwhile trip.

### In Pictures: America's Best Boutique Coffees

"If you're a business traveler," says Ric Rhinehart, executive director of the Specialty Coffee Association of America, "you have to make decisions about convenience vs. experience."

Rhinehart, who travels frequently for the trade association, likens it to choosing between fast food or fine dining. The drive-through may be ideal when convenience is paramount, but it can't compare with a distinctively prepared meal.

He also recommends independent coffee shops for business travelers bored with the same four hotel walls.

"Being able to explore the local geography and culture is what makes it engaging," he says. "Coffee houses are a great place to experience that."

### What You Get

At Ninth Street Espresso's Chelsea location in New York City, for example, patrons sidle up to a 24-foot-long coffee bar, where they order from a list of seven straightforward coffee drinks, including an espresso, macchiato and French press. Customers include a mix of tourists, locals and business travelers drawn partly to the neighborhood by its high-profile art galleries. Owner Ken Nye thinks the elbow-to-elbow experience is quintessentially New York.

And then there's the coffee. Three to five different single-origin coffees are offered each week, all of which have been roasted exclusively by Stumptown, a Portland, Ore.-based company. The Hair Bender, a blend of five different coffees from three of the world's major growing regions, is used in espresso drinks. But beware: baristas, as per store policy, rarely alter recipes, which can sometimes shock those used to ordering very specific drinks at Starbucks.

If [Ninth Street Espresso](#) creates a restrained coffee lover's experience, [LA Mill](#), a store in the Silverlake neighborhood in Los Angeles, is for hedonists. A local haunt, it is frequented by residents of the eclectic, artsy community, but its convenient location just off Highway 101 has also drawn residents from Pasadena and Venice and business travelers.

Coffee here is often single-origin--meaning that it comes from one farm--but it's never drip-brewed. Instead baristas use devices like the siphon, CafeSolo, Chemex and French press to deliver exquisite flavors.

"We've taken coffee and tea to a culinary experience," says Greg Torres, LA Mill's vice president of business development. The company has a food menu to match, which has been designed by two Michelin-rated chefs.

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### **Knowing Where To Look**

Small shops like Ninth Street Espresso and LA Mill are now easier to find, particularly with the advent of blogs and Web sites devoted to their discovery.

Bill Walsh, who writes about his adventures exploring independent cafes on a blog called [Pure Coffee](#), says the country's choice shops and roasts can be found with some sleuthing. He frequents the Web site [CoffeeGeek.com](#) for leads, but also solicits tips from friends in different cities.

***Are we a coffee-obsessed culture? Weigh in. Add your thoughts in the Reader Comments section below.***

"My goal is to find the hidden gems around the area," says Walsh, who is based in Syracuse, N.Y. Instead of assessing a cafe's atmosphere, he looks to its credentials, including its roaster, whether it belongs to the Specialty Coffee Association of America, and any awards it might have won. Also important to Walsh is the barista's ability to discuss where the coffee was grown, under what conditions and how the company sourced it.

An alternative for the truly time-pressed is to find out if a cafe 's roast is sold or served in area stores and restaurants. [Intelligentsia](#), a Chicago-based company, has three local stores but also sells its coffee in area supermarkets and restaurants, as does [Novo](#), a Denver coffee company.

Ninth Street Espresso's Ken Nye, who seeks out high-quality java while traveling, recommends starting the day a little early with a trip to a cafe .

"It's a must," he says. "It's not even the caffeine; it's the vibrancy and vitality of coffee."

**[In Pictures: America's Best Boutique Coffees](#)**