Coffee-loving visitors to Colombia’s capital are discovering a city that increasingly knows its beans. What’s behind Bogotá’s burgeoning café culture? An urban invigoration fuelled by a fresh infusion of creative energy, and a population that’s rightly proud of its rich heritage.

By Nell McShane Wolfhart  Photography by Piers Calvert
Colombia’s coffee has long set the standard for quality, since the first beans were planted in the 16th century and exports began in the 1800s. But until recently, it was nearly impossible to get a good cup in Bogotá.

Lately, though, Colombia’s capital city has experienced exponential growth, sparking a cultural revitalisation. Experimental theatres, art galleries, restaurants, nightclubs and trendy boutiques began percolating in neighbourhoods like the fine-dining Zona G, the nightlife-filled Zona Rosa and the upscale 93 Parque. And that growth is now expanding to coffee shops, vibrant new spots to fuel up for deep conversation or a night on the town.

Finally, it’s possible to find excellent Colombian coffee—in Colombia. Why did it take so long? The problem was everyone else’s love for the country’s coffee: Nearly 90 percent of Colombia’s beans were being exported. From October 2013 to October 2014, more than 10.8 million 60-kilo bags were consumed outside Colombia, of a total production of 12.3 million bags. The beans left behind were of the poorest quality. And the traditional method of brewing didn’t help—scalding the beans with too-hot water until all that’s left is a burnt, watery brown liquid often called tinto. On Bogotá streets, coffee vendors sell small plastic cups of this brew, heavily sugared, for around 1,000 pesos (US$0.35).

Happily for locals and visitors alike, things are changing fast. First, in 2002, came the Juan Valdez Café coffee shops, which are to Colombia what Starbucks is to the U.S.—a chain of cafes serving perfectly acceptable coffee that raised the bar on tinto. Then, to target an emerging new breed of higher-end coffee drinker, two years ago the company opened Orígenes de Juan Valdez Café, a high-design concept café. Patrons take a seat on the rooftop deck and order a Sierra Nevada French press whilst gazing down at Zona G, as in “Gourmet”—a couple of square blocks packed with popular restaurants such as El Cielo (molecular gastronomy), Bruto (Spanish Basque cuisine) and Criterión (Colombian ingredients meet French techniques).

And now, more-creative spots are eclipsing chain shops. Walk around Bogotá today and you’ll find a handful of standout independent cafés where devotees handcraft long blacks and lattes that rival what you’d find at the best coffee houses in New York or London. With their modern design, rows of AeroPresses and bearded baristas, these places may look as if they’ve been transplanted from Brooklyn. But there’s a distinction that makes the experience unique:

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**this spread:** (left) The specialty at Bourbon Coffee Roasters; (right) sweeping view of Bogotá and surrounding coffee country from Monserrate cable car.
Piping Hot Picks | Best of Bogotá

We asked the owners of Bogotá’s independent cafés to share a few of their favourite local spots.

PAOLA LAGUNA | Bourbon Coffee Roasters

At the door of Mini-mal, one of the most well-executed independent cafés in the bustling Zona G neighbourhood, the serenity of the café’s setting revolves around the coffee. On Saturdays, the café becomes a bar with live music.

TYLER YOUNGBLOOD | Azahar

Azahar is a Bohemian corner café and restaurant, one of the rising stars of this new wave of trendy shops and restaurants that draws diners to the Chapinero area. The café’s shopping container, painted slate grey, now houses a coffee shop in a recycled shipping container. We asked the owners of Azahar coffee shop to share a few of their favourite local spots.

TYLER YOUNGBLOOD

Billares Londres

A sports bar in the Usaquén neighborhood, Billares Londres putts a twist on the classic. Try the Pica-Pica: salty cheese, pickled chillies and cherry tomato skewers. Black Bear features handcrafted furniture and home accessories, plus interior design gurus. The Bogotá Beer Company has the city’s best beer and has the city’s best beer and multiple locations. Late-night partying means indie music at El Coq, or music and billiards at Billares Londres.

JOSHUA MAIDAN | Devoción

This spread: Cityscapes from the bustling Zona G neighbourhood, the serenity of the café’s setting revolves around the coffee. On Saturdays, the café becomes a bar with live music.

Devoción; historic 93 Parque, owned by Paola Laguna and Jose Alberto Rosero, is a sleek wood and glass café with a peaceful enclosed garden. It’s located in Quinta Camacho, a hub of trendy shops and restaurants that draws some of the city’s chicest for live music and gourmet meals. On busy Carrera 7, Devoción—which recently opened an outpost in Brooklyn, a true sign that a “scene” has emerged—sports marble countertops and antique bottles on wooden shelves. It also produces world-class coffee, made in Kyoto-style cold-dripers and siphons.

What these cafés have in common is a single-minded dedication to local sourcing. Bourbon buys from micro-lots in different areas of Colombia, such as Santander, Huila, Nariño and Cundinamarca. Varieties include Caturra and Castillo, and the beans are sourced from micro-lots all over the country.

In 2014 alone, Azahar sourced coffee from more than 40 different Colombian farmers, all of whom processed the beans on their own land: de-pulping them, fermenting them over-night and drying them on wood beds. These carefully farmed beans generally score above 86 points—a classification of excellent—on the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) “cupping” scale. They are noticeably sweet, clean and juicy, exhibiting unique terroir. Most of them, grown in partial or full shade, come from farms above 1,700 metres. (Higher altitudes usually yield better beans.) It’s this attention to buying distinctive beans from small-holder farms—under 5 hectares of land—that characterises this new third wave of Colombian coffee.

What led to the demand that’s allowing a greater share of the best beans to remain in Colombia? In recent years, more farmers have travelled abroad and returned with a taste for fine espresso and latte. Knowledge here even better. The beans are exclusively Colombian, steeped in Bogotá’s heritage and sourced from micro-lots all over the country. In the 93 Parque neighborhood, a shipping container painted slate grey now houses Azahar, one of the rising stars of this new Colombian coffee movement. It’s usually packed with young professionals who work nearby. 93 Parque is a great area to grab lunch and people-watch. Its sidewalks are free from the congestion you’ll find in other parts of the city. Plus, you’ll find boutiques such as local jewellery designer Mercedes Salazar, and an independent theatre, Cinematógrafo.

Other excellent indie cafés dot the city. Bourbon Coffee Roasters, owned by Paola Laguna and Jose Alberto Rosero, is a sleek wood and glass café with a peaceful enclosed garden. It’s located in Quinta Camacho, a hub of trendy shops and restaurants that draws some of the city’s chicest for live music and gourmet meals. On busy Carrera 7, Devoción—which recently opened an outpost in Brooklyn, a true sign that a “scene” has emerged—sports marble countertops and antique bottles on wooden shelves. It also produces world-class coffee, made in Kyoto-style cold-dripers and siphons.

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about roasting, brewing and barista techniques is a big part of this growth. Joshua Maidan, co-owner of Devoción, and Bourbon’s Laguna both give some credit to Starbucks for educating Colombians and promoting a coffee culture. “I believe it’s predominantly about educating local consumers about the benefits of drinking better coffee, and how to taste the differences of a good cup,” Maidan says.

Another factor keeping better beans at home is the positive impact the new cafés have on farmers. Coffee farmers are largely at the mercy of the “C” market (coffee priced as a commodity), which almost all exporters and importers use to determine what farmers are paid. This number, however, has almost no relation to the actual costs of production. Being able to sell more coffee locally means less reliance on the international price. As Azahar co-founder Tyler Youngblood says, “If specialty roasters like ourselves are buying coffee directly from farmers, cooperatives and growers’ associations, then milling, sorting, roasting, packaging and serving the product, we’re certainly not going to be changing the cost of a cup of coffee every day; we can offer farmers stable prices that allow them to make a living and maintain the quality of their product.” And with lower transportation costs, plus the benefit of fresher beans, consumers benefit as well.

“The domestic consumption of Colombian coffee is on the rise, in large part spearheaded by specialty roasters,” Youngblood says. “Regular roasted coffee sales are the highest in over a decade, and premium coffee sales have been growing by as much as 10 percent. Growth as high as 20 percent is expected for specialty coffee retail, as more and more people here are drinking coffee away from home.”

This means that locals are filling the new breed of cafés. Youngblood says that just 10 percent of Azahar’s customers are foreigners. “Often the coffee or farm names on chalkboards in cafés in the United States, Europe or Asia are so foreign to your average customer that they don’t really mean much to them,” he says. “In Colombia, it’s not that way at all. People are really moved when they discover that the coffee they’re drinking comes from an individual farmer in a part of the country they’re familiar with. There’s a growing pride in Colombian beans.” Waking up to smell the coffee, indeed. This is a country just beginning to enjoy its own best product—and the chance to start sharing it with visitors.

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Tyler Youngblood
Co-founder of Azahar

Nell McShane Wulfhart has been published in The New York Times and Travel + Leisure.

this spread:
Coffee berries ripening on the vine; (right) Devoción serves 15 to 20 local coffee varietals.

The Coffee Triangle
Bogotá is finally enjoying the fruits of Zona Cafetera, a 550-square-mile, UNESCO-designated Coffee Cultural Landscape just 100 miles west of the capital city.