

Coffee in the Time of Corona

Words
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PHOTOGRAPHS
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Black Fox Coffee's flagship in the Financial District of New York City sits just off the corner of Pine and Pearl, and its understated storefront on the first floor of the 67-story building at 70 Pine blends well with the block. It's easy to miss if you're not part of its crowd of quick-paced regulars working in the neighborhood's office towers.

When asked what he'd missed most about his day-to-day behind the counter at Black Fox Coffee, Jonathan Wilson said, "I missed being busy. It's a very busy coffee shop on a good day, and we have lots of good days during the week. One of my favorite things was being in the thick of it when it was a little rushed. It worked a different part of your head and it's been frustrating not being able to get back to that."

Wilson was speaking in early July 2020, six months into the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. New York's shutdown, introduced in March, has been especially difficult for small businesses like coffee shops that have seen their business and day-to-day operations mutate several times.

Variety Roasters, which has grown to five stores in New York since its inception in 2008, has quieter cafes sprinkled across Manhattan and Brooklyn. Owner Gavin Compton lamented, "That time to catch up with each individual person is totally gone now when you're wearing a mask and you can only have one person in the store at a time. It makes it way more awkward."

Across stores and across neighborhoods, the COVID-19 pandemic has flipped normal dynamics on their head, then flipped them again. It has warped the way coffee shop owners, regulars, and employees interact with one another and the physical spaces of their shops, cafes, coffee bars, and sidewalks.

Each shop has seen its own distinct set of changes in customer base and mood. Black Fox Coffee, for example, has transformed from a















bustling, thousand-cup-a-day downtown terminal to a more tranquil, neighborhood drop-in.

“During [this pandemic], it’s been 95% residents, but in a normal world we’re seeing about 75% daily workers in the area and the remaining 25% is a mix of tourists and residents,” said owner Daniel Murphy. Ground Support in SoHo has seen its weekend traffic change from 80% tourist to 99% regular, and it has picked up new regulars from the already close-knit neighborhood along the way.

“During these times, it’s [about] 99% [regulars],” said founder Steven Sadof. “We’ve had some times where, whether it’s been during [the pandemic] or after the [Black Lives Matter] protests, that people wanted to come to SoHo and see what the devastation was like. Ninety-nine percent of people who are coming in are our friends, who are within walking distance, because people aren’t riding the subway.”

Even curious visitors checking out the empty SoHo streets or the shattered glass and boarded up windows after nights of unrest might be reminded to be respectful of the neighborhood and its residents, said Sadof.

What hasn’t changed in the four months of lockdown is that shop owners and employees miss the pre-pandemic rituals of their shops. But they’re looking for silver linings in these new interpersonal dynamics.

To a person, owners and workers at stores that had previously become accustomed to high-volume traffic have enjoyed the change of pace, and the space and time it has afforded them.

“It’s that very small-town feel now,” said Sadof of Ground Support, an iconic independent operation that’s always been very neighborhood-forward.

“Ultimately, it’s been a pretty rewarding experience. We’ve seen the same people come in at the same time every day for the past three months,” he said. “Despite the sort of closeness and warmth that SoHo had before, it has become so much tighter. The pace of business has slowed down. The pace of life slowed down because nobody really had anywhere to go. Neighbors were all talking to each other and talking to us. It really felt like a small town for the past three months, which was wonderful and a great distraction or comfort in otherwise difficult times.”

Murphy of Black Fox noticed an even more dramatic shift. “We’re such a busy, high-volume cafe that being able to slow down and have a lingering conversation with our customers and ask them a few more questions about their day that we wouldn’t be able to do when [there are] six people in line behind them,” he said. “So just slowing it all down and having more time to spend one-on-one with our customers has been great.”

Some more spacious cafes, like Variety Roasters, weren’t built on heavy morning or commuter traffic. But even it has found ways to appreciate a slower pace.

Ciera Torres—a New York City native, ten-year veteran of the city’s coffee scene, and manager of Variety Roasters’ Williamsburg location since February—noted that, “From a behind the counter standpoint, one nice thing is that... people are paying more attention. They’re asking more questions about our coffee.”

“We’re also able to understand how people want their coffee fixed,” she said. Instead of serving them a “cup with room,” she’s been able to understand how regular customers prefer their coffee and to make it for them.









That they're able to find silver linings doesn't mean that shop owners aren't itching for a return to normal, especially those whose businesses and cultures were reliant on the ability for customers to linger.

As much as the pandemic has demanded resiliency and fostered a deeper connection with regular customers, it's come at the expense of comfort in a New York that, already rushed and unforgiving, has somehow managed to become more anxious.

"Customers are missing the option to linger," said Compton of Variety Roasters. "We've stayed open and the menu hasn't really changed, but everything we're doing now is a little rushed and a little less comfortable and a little inhibited. People being able to run into a friend in a cafe and linger over a conversation is something that is missing."

At Black Fox Coffee, it's the energy that's missing, said Steven Levy, Head of Operations. "In New York, whether it's for the good or the bad, everyone becomes accustomed to the hustle and bustle, and how crazy it is. Even though at times you kind of hate it, it's something that, because you get so used to it, it's definitely feeling like it's missing at the moment."

It has also come at the expense of employees. Ground Support cut hours and staff drastically. Black Fox Coffee is down to six employees from 36. At one point Variety Roaster's team shrunk from 55 members to nine.

"[At Ground Support] we had to let almost everybody go. The solution to that is to get behind the counter," said Sadof.

"[I'm most looking forward to] getting our team back together," said Murphy from Black Fox Coffee. "We had such a great team [before the pandemic] and we had such great talent across all disciplines—back of house, front of house, our baristas, our coffee director. So just getting that team back together and the rapport back and seeing everyone functioning at a really high level is something I'm really looking forward to."

For Wilson, speaking from behind his counter in the Financial District, the change is something to look forward to.

"It feels entirely different now. It's kind of uncharted territory moving forward. A lot of the systems and habits that we had in place are no longer applicable. It's kind of like starting over a little bit, and that will be really exciting," he said.

As she wrapped up the day, Torres thought of a return to normal almost celebratorily. "I feel like I took it for granted a little bit before. You're thinking, 'It's always so busy, it's always so packed.' You can kind of see all the bad in it," she said.

"But you know when your grandmother's cooking in the kitchen and everyone comes in and takes a bite? That's how I always felt about the cafe. Everyone is entering my kitchen for a moment and hanging out. I miss having that space to let people take a moment."