

Fika Seeker

For the Swedes, coffee is more than a drink – it’s a way of life. And the best place to experience that life is in one of Gothenburg’s independent cafés

UNTIL 2010 THERE were no branches of Starbucks in Sweden, but that doesn’t mean the Swedes don’t thirst after coffee. On the contrary, Sweden consistently ranks among the world’s biggest coffee-drinking countries (usually outdone by Finland), and the *fika*, or coffee break, is a national institution. To see the *fika* in action, head to Gothenburg, the city generally reckoned to be Sweden’s coffee capital, and a place that has no interest in Starbucks and the other multinational franchises.

“If we want to meet up we’ll say, ‘Let’s have a fika!’” says Gothenburg resident Lena Larsson as she orders her favourite, a cappuccino and an apple bun, in Mauritz Kaffe (2 Fredsgatan, tel: +46 (0)31 806 971). “In some countries people usually meet in the pub, but here we’re more likely to catch up over coffee and a bun.” Larsson agrees that Gothenburg is Sweden’s coffee centre, with even more high-quality, independent coffee shops than Stockholm. Maybe it’s because it’s a university town (students are reliable café customers) that the cobbled streets are now chock-full of espresso bars, and the Old Town still houses places such as Le Petit Café (2 Haga Nygata, tel: +46 (0)31 127 191), all chintzy wallpaper and vintage chairs.

To experience it for yourself, follow Larsson’s example and start in Mauritz Kaffe, the city’s longest-running coffee



Left, Le Petit Café, one of the Old Town’s old-school options



Clockwise from top left, Adam at Doppio, Mauritz Kaffe, da Matteo’s bakery, Café Kringlan, Bar Centro

shop. “I opened this place 34 years ago,” says Tord Mauritz Wetter, the charismatic, white-haired owner/manager. “But this is an old company,” he adds, as if three decades of business made him a newbie. “My great grandfather, Mauritz Svensson, started importing coffee to Gothenburg in 1888. We’re still doing the same, importing from Ethiopia, East Africa and Indonesia, but whereas he was selling to shops, we serve it here.” Wetter says that the popularity of coffee in Sweden started with King Charles XII. “He went on a trip to Turkey and there he learned to love coffee. By 1800 or so, because of him, coffee became a big thing in Sweden. And now it’s very big.”

Wetter bakes his own bread and fruit buns on the premises, and customers can also buy beans here. Like many in the trade, Wetter believes in roasting and grinding your

own beans at home, and sells them in their raw, green state. Speaking to him it quickly becomes clear that leaving ground coffee to sit around is a no-no: “Old coffee loses all of the natural aromas!” I dip my hand into the pile of beans that are about to be ground for the espresso machine; they’re toasty-warm, having emerged from the small roasting oven just moments earlier.

IN THE EARLY 1970S Wetter took a trip to Rome and brought the espresso bar concept back to Gothenburg. “We imported the Italian way of making coffee, so to speak,” he laughs. To the uninitiated, that means no seats, just high tables at which to drink your espresso fast, Roma-style. “So we were the first,” he continues. “Some 20 years later, in the 1990s, the other coffee bars came along, like da Matteo.”



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FANCY A FIKA?
FIVE OF THE BEST
PLACES TO STOP
FOR A COFFEE
IN GOTHENBURG



⇒ **BAR ITALIA**

These second-generation Italians couldn't be more passionate about their coffee bar. They haven't closed for a single day in five years of business, and the staff say they get together for lunch even on their days off.
7 Prinsgatan



⇒ **CAFE HUSAREN**

Husaren's cinnamon buns are the size of your head, and popular with students as a nutritionally questionable alternative to a proper meal. Great coffee, but Husaren lacks the quirkiness of other Old Town cafés.
28 Haga Nygata, tel: +46 (0)31 136 378



⇒ **CAFE KRINGLAN**

They don't come any cuter or cosier than this tiny Old Town café packed with the young and the beautiful. The counter is piled high with pastries and the benches covered with handmade cushions.
13 Haga Nygata, tel: +46 (0)31 130 908



⇒ **CIGARREN**

Bringing together two of Sweden's greatest passions – drinking good coffee and smoking good tobacco – this small café dedicates half of its floor space to a vast cigar humidor.
6 Järntorget, tel: +46 (0)31 141 560



⇒ **BAR CENTRO**

Lots of local coffee lovers maintain that Bar Centro, a sparse, no-nonsense espresso bar, serves the tastiest coffee in Gothenburg. It's certainly up there with the best of them.
31 Kyrkogatan, tel: +46 (0)31 711 0027



It's a short walk from Mauritz to one of da Matteo's three locations, tucked away off the hip little shopping street of Viktorias Passagen (14 Södra Larmgatan, tel: +46 (0)31 774 2881). It's bigger than Mauritz, and bright white with a fast-paced feel. If the queues are longer than usual today, it's because the staff are celebrating the 15th birthday of this branch by giving away free cappuccinos to a grateful crowd. Overseeing the throng is manager Pernilla Gard, a 25-year-old star of the Swedish coffee scene. She competes as part of Sweden's National Barista Team, which triumphed in 2010's Nordic Barista Cup. "Hopefully we

will win again in August 2011 and make it to the world championships," says Gard, who also offers me a tour of da Matteo's nearby micro-roastery and bakery.

She introduces Per Nordby, the roast master, who shyly confirms that it's his name on many of the award certificates lining da Matteo's walls. "Meeting our suppliers is important," explains Gard. "So Per has been out to Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Brazil, and I have gone to Ethiopia. We're a small business buying in small quantities, but we try to create a direct relationship with the farmers in the countries that supply us and make sure they get what they deserve."



Clockwise from far left, no-nonsense Bar Centro, Swedish-style fika treats, the environmentally conscious Doppio, Tord Mauritz Wetter, a 34-year veteran of Gothenburg's thriving café scene

Sweden may well trace its coffee history back to the 19th century, but, says Gard, "In the past five years the coffee culture in Gothenburg has really taken off." Like Wetter, she recommends a DIY approach: "Have your own grinder at home, and make sure the beans haven't been roasted for too long. If they're too dark, they've lost their aroma."

Walking through the da Matteo roasting house, Gard shows off the huge industrial roasting machine. "This is a new type of roaster; we're one of the first in Europe to have it," she says proudly. "It's the Loring SmartRoast – one of the most environmentally friendly machines."

Environmental responsibility is a factor throughout the Gothenburg coffee scene, and the subject crops up again at Doppio (7 Krokslättsgatan, tel: +46 (0)31 425 666) while speaking to Australian co-owner/manager Adam Norman.

"In Australia I found some places were sourced almost to the exclusion of what it actually tasted like," says Norman, in between operating an espresso machine and chatting with regulars in fluent Swedish. "We have Fairtrade coffee here and it tastes excellent. I want coffee to be Fairtrade and full-bodied, so I've worked hard to make

sure that winning the moral high ground has never taken the focus away from the taste."

For Norman, making money isn't the primary appeal of running a coffee shop, an attitude that chimes well with the Gothenburg lifestyle. "We didn't want to just be the owners counting the money. We wanted this to be a place people come to because of how it makes them feel. In Sweden, I find there's more emphasis on the spirit in which you do things, rather than how much money you make doing them." Great coffee, ethically sourced and expertly prepared? That's the Swedish way.

Sophy Grimshaw