

# Coffee with Personality

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With its sprawling cityscape and expansive network of eclectic neighborhoods, Berlin is an easy city in which to get lost, architecturally and literally. Berlin stands apart from other prominent European destinations like Amsterdam, Lisbon, Rome, and Prague, because, after World War II, much of the city had been bombed and needed to be rebuilt. The remaining buildings were also pulled down and replaced over the following 70 years.

In contrast, when you walk around Amsterdam's canal district, which dates to the 17th century, many cobblestone streets and brick buildings wear the weathering of time and history. Same with Rome, where you can escape the harsh summer sun by standing in the shadow of ancient monuments that date back to the 7th century BCE.

The Berlin that today stands on the banks of the Spree River has become one of the most design-forward capitals of Europe, with bold, modernist architectural façades opposed by restored neo-classical landmarks and somber memorials. Every neighborhood has its own flavor, from the bohemian, artsy Kreuzberg to the restored, more-residential Prenzlauer Bern—making even short cross-city trips feel like an adventure.

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The specialty coffee café design in Berlin takes after the rest of the city, shaking off the old industrial look that has become almost cliché in craft coffee (think the exposed brick and leather motifs of Devoción in Brooklyn, New York City, or the exposed beams and raw metal accents of Sightglass Coffee in the Mission District of San Francisco). Instead, many have embraced a more modern, minimalist aesthetic.

“Based on some of the most design-forward, prominent Berlin cafes, they don't follow the former trend of old wood and lamps from factories anymore to show the craft of specialty coffee,” said Thorsten Keller, the owner of Hamburg-based online magazine shop Coffee Table Mags. “Instead, there has been a design shift for most of the new coffee places. They look modern, clean and somehow fancy, showing that specialty coffee is becoming more of a luxury product.”

One example of this more upscale design shift is the Aussie-style cafe Zacharias Kaffeebar, which took on a quite quintessential European cafe look. Center stage in the room is an expansive, smooth walnut and opulent marble-surfaced coffee bar and a dark leather sofa meanders along one side. On sunny days, it's delightful to bask in front of the big, floor-to-ceiling windows sipping a “Magic”—a coffee drink exported from Melbourne (double ristretto topped with steamed milk).

“We took inspiration from the way traditional standing cafes in Italy engage with their customers, with a faster pace around the counter, which is designed to encourage guests to have a drink there and interact with the barista,” said Zacharias Kaffeebar Co-Founder Johannes Knoetig. “On the other hand, the slower and more relaxed sitting area allows for longer stays, so we can tailor to the different needs of our customers.”

Keller's favorite cafe design, Bonanza Coffee's Adalbertstrasse location, charted a different course on its minimalist design journey, with its lofty space outlined in modern and clean straight lines of glass and wood. The simple architecture is broken up by big leafy monstera, transforming what would be a stark space into a cozy hideaway.













“It allows you to hide or feel separated from the rest of the visitors when you just want to have an intimate talk with a good friend,” said Keller. “It’s also lovely that the roastery is in a backyard, so you can also relax in front of the roastery on summer days without the noise and distractions from the big city.”

Munich-based roastery Man versus Machine takes minimalism and luxury to a whole new level with their counter-service cafe in a Lacoste boutique. Bathed in alligator-green, the simple, walk-up window displays only a La Marzocco espresso machine and a tray of croissants and *pain au chocolat*.

Meanwhile, other cafes have taken a less branded, more localized approach, like Jules, with two distinct locations: a high-fashion cafe in Geisberg and a more industrial, casual cafe-biergarten in Kreuzberg. Similarly, Five Elephant Roastery runs four locations across the city, using unique materials and distinctive designs to match the vibe of each of the cafes’ neighborhoods. For example, its city-center spot in the Mitte district shows off with glossy, black-tiled wainscoting juxtaposed with whitewashed walls and crisp fluorescent lights. Meanwhile, its location in the famous KaDeWe department store, dial up the design with a bold terrazzo-flanked bar and matching ink-black machines. And as a foil to the others, the more hipster Kreuzberg cafe takes a softer, more organic turn, swathed in soft wood with big windows bringing in the warmth of the tree-lined street outside.

For Berlin coffee roasters, attention to design doesn’t just stop at the physical space; they’re also well-known for their artistic approach to coffee bean packaging as well. Here, the roasters seem to have landed in two different camps, opting for either simple and minimalist or colorful and bold.

The established specialty coffee strongholds, known as the ‘Big Three,’ (THE BARN, and the aforementioned Bonanza Coffee Roasters and Five Elephant) were some of the first to the craft coffee scene, and have since become well-known across the world. Their aesthetic relies heavily on their logo, use of white space and simple typography to carry the packaging. Five Elephant dials up its design language by wrapping its white bags in a bright, color-blocked sleeve, with its elephant logo displayed prominently on top.

For August63, a newer roaster that opened in September of 2021, Founder Ken Braz and Head of Design Carla Blaumann knew they needed a more “eye-catching” design to compete.

“We had to create something new in order to stand out in the very dense landscape of Berlin coffee roasters,” said Blaumann. “[As such], we developed a basic structure that served as a canvas for a unique design, which would capture consumers’ attention, while also preserving the brand’s recognition value,” said Blaumann.

The framed label on the front is divided into two sections. The left side displays a unique illustration (often a collage) that’s inspired both by the heritage of the coffee as well as its unique flavor profiles, while the right side includes the sourcing details and tasting notes.

“Each of our designs represents the unique qualities of the coffee,” said Blaumann. “Some are inspired by the farm where the coffee was grown, while others reflect the environment and “mood” where the coffee will be enjoyed or the complexity of the flavor profile. We also collaborate with other designers, who create their own unique designs for our coffee bags.

As to the color palette of each of the playful designs, each is linked to the specific coffee.

“While tasting coffees on the cupping table, I can usually link flavors with colors, which helps me understand the different taste nuances,” said Braz. “That’s why each coffee has different color schemes in order for the consumer to understand the taste notes better.”

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For the eighth-most popular city destination in the world, it’s surprising that Berlin’s coffee scene remains decidedly local. It’s not a city that wears its coffee culture on its chest; instead, it’s like a treasure hunt, with hidden gems strewn across its 12 distinct districts. And while it may not get the same attention of more popular craft coffee destinations like Copenhagen, Tokyo, or San Francisco, it has taken the art of the full consumer experience to a totally different level—underscoring that what’s outside the cup is equally important as what’s inside.