

B creates a buzz

By Don Ellis

There are a dozen people waiting for coffee, the place is too bright and the service is frosty. People in line are looking at their watches as someone orders a low-fat mocha decaf with extra foam. The 2% milk is gone, the coffee station is a mess and the cramped quarters are made unbearable by the corporate Muzak playing on the tinny sound system. You pass the time reading a CD cover on a counter displaying impulse buys: teddy bears, travel mugs and after-coffee mints.

Meanwhile across town, the air in B Espresso, the new Queen Street East power spot, is fragrant with coffee, and the room quiet: There's no jostling, and there are plenty of servers, so no one waits more than a minute for their order. The coffee – four varieties, so you can leave your Starbucks ordering booklet at home – is served steaming and bracing.

It's a move up the coffee hierarchy at B, the Italian-style espresso bar that opened six weeks ago. Staffers look as though they were flown in from Italy. Dapper baristas (hence the "B" in the name) hover about the espresso machine, while svelte servers sashay around the room clearing tables. Newspapers and glossy magazines sit neatly in racks, and a hanging placard informs us that only Illy coffee beans are used.

Located in the Robertson Chocolate Factory (better known as Citytv's former residence), B may be about the best culinary surprise this area has ever had to offer. In its audacious sleekness, B Espresso pays homage to the spirited espresso bars in Italy, where the venues are an extension of life, not just a shop churning out brew.

"The whole idea behind B," owner Bruno Colozza says, "is to create an authentic espresso bar setting, like the ones found in Italy. Since the entire layout was Italian-specific, I went to Italy to observe the marriage of art and function in espresso bars throughout Northeastern Italy. When I returned I started looking for a location."

After St. Joseph Media purchased the 130-year-old building, it rapidly filled with media and ad agencies such as Publicis and Top Advertising. Colozza saw potential in the street-level space and commissioned Anna Simone of Cecconi Simone Design to turn it into an aggressively cool espresso bar.

Much of the room's bright space is filled with two communal tables whose tops have been fashioned out of man-made Ciot marble. Thousands of river stones were packed together, drowned in a clear epoxy resin, then "cut" and smoothed to create tabletops so original-looking their mere presence adds immediate cachet.

B is at times too design-centric – a mere shuffling of a chair can throw the whole sightline off.

But that doesn't alter in the slightest the immense satisfaction of a finely made espresso. When it comes to the almighty coffee, B succeeds hugely.

Two things in particular set B apart from other coffee bars. The first is quality control. In making an espresso, there are many variables at play: water pressure, temperature, timing and freshness of the coffee. Even humidity affects the making of an espresso.

The second is schematics; Colozza has returned to the mood of Italy. "Actually, Starbucks does a fine job," he says. "But we're going a different route with B. We modeled the bar directly after the IBC (Illy Bar Concept) cafes." IBCs are high-design espresso bars, commissioned by Illy, that have sprouted throughout Italy. The use of Simone's glorious design cements the dreamy atmosphere of an espresso bar in a Toronto that never was.

When we say Starbucks or Timothy's lacks the emotional depth of a fish tank, we're not being anti-establishment; we are simply acknowledging the absence of character. B, on the other hand, has a strong, personable character that is sure to draw people in. When teams of abnormally talented people come together and create something like B Espresso, it should be noted. It's like having Steinbeck, Chaucer, Bronte and Conrad collaborate on a coffee shop.