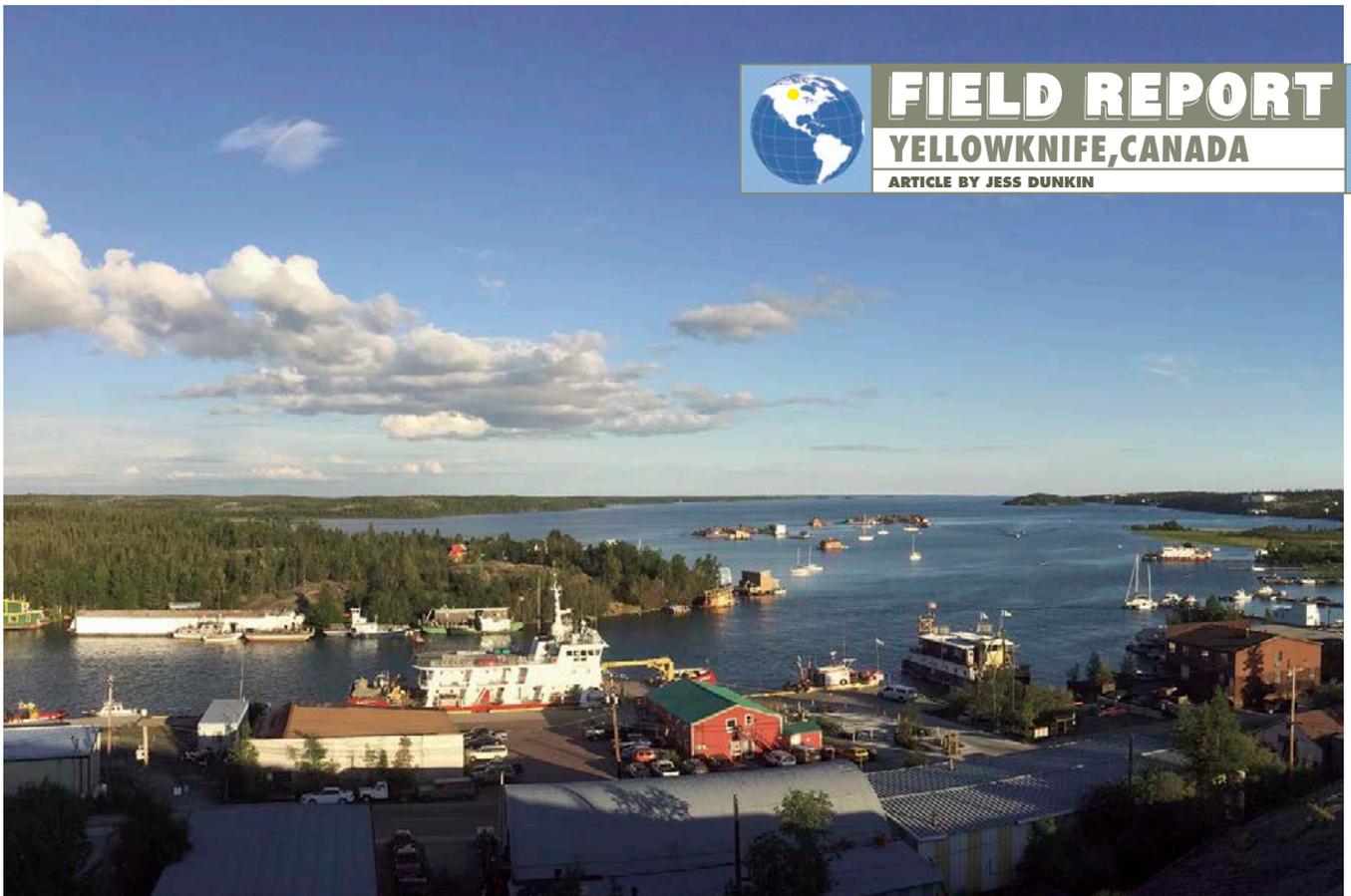




FIELD REPORT

YELLOWKNIFE, CANADA

ARTICLE BY JESS DUNKIN



PHOTOS BY JESS DUNKIN



PHOTOS BY PAT KANE



PHOTO BY PAT KANE

YELLOWKNIFE, CANADA

WHEN I MOVED TO YELLOWKNIFE from Ottawa in 2015, the city had a number of dedicated coffee shops, but none made a cappuccino to my liking. I heard rumors about a mobile coffee bar that crafted delicious and beautiful espresso-based drinks, but never managed to be in the right place at the right time. Then—seemingly overnight—the city of 20,000 experienced what a friend has described as a coffee renaissance. In the span of 18 months, the mobile bar was joined by three coffee shops and a roastery, all of which could reasonably be described as third-wave. People don't often think of the sub-Arctic as a destination for coffee lovers, but there is a small-but-mighty group of Yellowknife residents working to change that.

For those not familiar with Canada's North, Yellowknife is the capital of the Northwest Territories (NWT), the largest (1,346,106 sq km) and most populous (44,469) of the country's three northern territories.

Yellowknife is located on the ancestral territory of the Wilhideh Yellowknives Dene, who know this place as Sõmba K'è, meaning "the place where the money is." The moniker references the city's mining heritage. It was gold that put Yellowknife—known as the diamond capital of North America—on the map in the 1930s. Today the government of the Northwest Territories is the city's largest employer, and tourism is the fastest-growing industry. Visitors come from all over the world to see the Aurora Borealis, the dancing multicolored lights peculiar to the polar night skies.

At 62° north, Yellowknife is in the land of the midnight sun. The long, warm summer days are perfect for gardening, paddling, and dancing up a storm at Folk on the Rocks. During the winter months, the days are short and temperatures are often well below -20°C. Even then, Yellowknifers can be found outdoors, skiing, dogsledding, or at work on the city's famous Snow Castle.

Opposite page, at top: Yellowknife is a small city on a big lake in Canada's subarctic. A paradise for outdoorspeople, the city of 20,000 also has a thriving arts scene and a growing number of restaurants and cafes to serve every palate. Below: When he's not changing diapers, Eric Binion can be found in his compact Old Town shop roasting beans from Mexico, Indonesia, and beyond. Barren Ground Coffee is committed to providing coffee enthusiasts in Yellowknife and other NWT communities with beans that are ethically sourced, locally roasted, and delicious.

This page: Jawah Bercier and her dad, Patrick Scott, opened Birchwood Coffee Kò in 2016. The young Tłı̄chǫ Denewoman is the only Indigenous coffeepreneur in Yellowknife. She and her staff serve J.J. Bean of Vancouver, B.C., alongside traditional fare like bannock sandwiches and rice pudding in their bright downtown location.

Though distant from major urban centers, Yellowknife is remarkably cosmopolitan, with a diverse population, a vibrant arts community, and an increasingly eclectic food scene.

COFFEELICIOUS

On a sunny afternoon in February, Verena Faber is installed behind her pop-up coffee bar, Coffeelicious, at the Yellowknife Ski Club serving lovingly prepared latte macchiatos and Americanos to ski-suit-clad patrons. I watch as the slight barista cheerfully explains the difference between a flat white and a cappuccino to a new customer, and offers a tutorial in latte art to a young patron.

Verena cut her teeth as a barista in New Zealand. While her partner, Silvan, toiled in the library on his PhD thesis, Verena learned the finer points of pulling a shot and steaming milk. Under the watchful eye of the country's top latte artist, she also learned how to make her coffee creations look beautiful.

Originally from Germany, Verena and Silvan arrived to Yellowknife in 2012 while on a cross-country tour. They intended to stay for two weeks; five and a half years later, they're still here. Both landed jobs in the mining industry, but coffee was never far from Verena's mind. She saw room in the local market for well-made espresso drinks—she just wasn't

interested in opening a brick-and-mortar shop.

Mobile espresso bars are common in New Zealand, but were unheard of in Yellowknife in 2014. While the city has warm, sunny summers, they are short. The rest of the year, the climate doesn't lend itself to serving coffee from a van. Verena's solution was to purchase a 20kg Nuova Simonelli Musica she can carry from car to venue.

Coffeelicious is busiest in summer with outdoor events, like the Canada Day Celebrations, and in the weeks leading up to Christmas, with holiday parties and customer-appreciation events. The rest of the year, Verena may only haul out the Musica once a month.

Verena, who recently returned to university, has no interest in turning the business into a full-time job: "It is more enjoyable if we don't have to make coffee for a living," she says. "For us, it's like a hobby or a dedication." A mobile enterprise allows the passionate barista to set up occasionally and to make choices that are good for the environment and the taste buds, like serving organic milks and organic and Fair Trade beans (a self-made blend of Salt Spring coffee beans).

THE FAT FOX CAFÉ

With its comfy chairs, handmade tables, and well-stocked bookshelves, the Fat Fox Café has become a favorite in downtown Yellowknife for curry and coffee enthusiasts alike. Owners Emma Atkinson and Jeremy Flatt started tossing around the idea of a café shortly after Emma moved to Yellowknife in 2012. (Jeremy arrived in 2010.) For everything the British expats loved about their new home, there were a few things they missed: "Scones with clotted cream and jam. Tea made with boiling water so that it infuses properly. Rich, flavorful curries."

Coffee was not initially a priority for the couple, for reasons of taste and investment. A chance encounter with a heavenly cortado in Essex gave Jeremy pause, more so when he was unable to find a similar experience in Yellowknife. It was Emma's realization, however—that their small menu would benefit from a more robust drink list—that sealed the deal.

Though they arrived late to the idea of serving coffee, Jeremy and Emma were committed to doing it well. They bought a good machine (Wega Atlas) and an even better grinder (Compak K10), but most importantly, they invested in their staff, which is no small feat in Yellowknife. Their first full-time barista attended a coffee academy in Toronto. Newer employees have received in-house training from Edmonton-based Transcend Coffee, whose roasts are featured at The Fat Fox. (Jeremy cannot say enough nice things about Transcend's coffee and their support.) In the end, Emma admits, "It's good that we decided to go the route we did because we underestimated the demand in Yellowknife for high-quality coffee."

There are a few things on The Fat Fox menu you can't get elsewhere in town—including, you guessed it, a cortado—but Emma and Jeremy agree it's their approach to food and drink that sets them apart: "We make everything from scratch: coffee syrup, ketchup, soup stock. We want people to feel like everything that was made for them was made purposefully."

BIRCHWOOD COFFEE KÒ

Birchwood Coffee Kò, owned and operated by Jawah Bercier and her dad, Patrick Scott, is the second of two coffee shops that opened downtown in the summer of 2016. Jawah is unique among the city's coffee-preneurs. Born and raised in Yellowknife, she is the only local in the bunch. Jawah, who is Th çhò Dene, is also the only indigenous business owner.

Jawah's love affair with coffee began at 13 while vacationing in Vancouver. During a visit to J.J. Bean, she fell head over heels, vowing to

work there someday. She bided her time learning the trade at Gourmet Cup, one of Yellowknife's longstanding coffee shops. When she relocated to Vancouver after high school, she made good on her adolescent promise. Though she had a reputation for delicious lattes while at Gourmet Cup, Jawah credits J.J. Bean's rigorous training program with making her the barista she is today. It's no wonder that Birchwood serves J.J. Bean coffee (made on a manual Unic Mira Tri).

Jawah moved back to Yellowknife, uncertain of her career path. Then her dad suggested opening a coffee shop. It was a no-brainer for the coffee enthusiast: "I've tried other things, but my go-to, the place where I've felt the most comfortable and the most at ease, was in a coffee shop," she says. "I like the fact that you can make someone's day by giving them good customer service and a good cup of coffee."

Birchwood has also provided the self-taught baker an opportunity to share some of her favorite Northern recipes with customers, like bannock-clad breakfast sandwiches and bush pudding. The menu, the service, and the name (kò means "home" in Th çhò) all reflect Jawah and Patrick's desire for Birchwood to be a welcoming home base for Yellowknifers.

Though half of the city's population is indigenous, the small-business community doesn't reflect local demographics. A young Dene woman owning her own business is a powerful statement here. "She probably wouldn't see herself as a role model, but she is," says Patrick. "She's proof that if you're willing to put the effort out and the resources in, you can be successful. You can do it as an Indigenous person."

MARIO'S MARVELLOUS MOVIE EMPORIUM

Yellowknife's newest coffee shop, Mario's Marvellous Movie Emporium, opened in June 2017. You'll be forgiven for thinking that Mario's offers something other than coffee. The "coffeeship," which is moored in Yellowknife Bay, is arrived at by foot, skis, boat, or car, depending on the season.

There are no hours at Mario's. When the green flag is up, it's open. When the red flag is up, it's not. There are also no prices. Patrons are invited to pay what they want. Those who manage to catch the green flag flying are promised a convivial atmosphere in which to enjoy an espresso-based drink made with Kenya's Java House beans and a conversation with a neighbor or stranger. As owner Frans Barnard explains it, "It's really not the kind of place to come and sit on your own. You're going to end up talking to other people."

Frans arrived to Yellowknife from Kenya five years ago, when his partner, Heather, accepted a job as the territorial epidemiologist. The family of three moved onto a houseboat, which doubles as Frans' home office. (The Zimbabwean expat co-owns a consultancy that provides training and crisis support for humanitarian organizations working in conflict zones.) Mario's came about as a way to "stave off boredom" when Frans wasn't traveling.

An off-grid coffeeship is a very particular enterprise. Both the lights and the lever Fracino espresso machine run on propane, though plans are in the works to expand the solar bank; a lightening-bolt shaped pellet stove provides heat; and water is pumped by hand. Neither tradespeople nor inspectors will make the journey to Mario's, so the work of installing and maintaining the houseboat's various systems has been done by Frans and a handful of generous friends. The single biggest issue is freezeup and breakup, when the ice forms in the fall and disperses in the spring. "We don't open during those times because we don't want people from the mainland with no experience of the ice seeing the green flag and deciding that the crossing looks like a good idea," says Frans.

Serving coffee is just the beginning. Frans has used Mario's as a launching point for Dangerous Camp for Kids and Dangerous Day

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KEG OUTLET

Owned and operated by British expats Emma Atkinson and Jeremy Flatt, The Fat Fox is a favorite of both coffee and curry enthusiasts in Yellowknife. The Fat Fox was the first coffee shop in the city to serve locally roasted Barren Ground Coffee. They also do wonderful things with Transcend beans from Edmonton, AB, and homemade syrups.



PHOTOS BY ANGELA GZOWSKI

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Mario's Marvellous Movie Emporium is Yellowknife's only floating coffee shop, at least for part of the year. In the colder months, you can ski or snowmobile to the coffee "ship" for an espresso-based drink made by owner Frans Barnard with Kenya's Java House beans and a cinnamon bun topped with locally harvested cranberries.



PHOTO BY JESS DUNKIN

for Adults, but he is open to other ideas, which he calls “good ideas that will feed people’s souls.”

BARREN GROUND COFFEE

The newest addition to the Yellowknife scene is Barren Ground Coffee (BGC), a roastery in the city’s Old Town. BGC is reached via a narrow alleyway that runs between an automotive shop and a warehouse. Previously known as the Carver’s Place, a patina of soapstone dust remained in the compact space when owner Eric Binion began improvements last year. Today, the roaster occupies center stage with a cupping counter behind, a retail counter to the right, and a small bar for enjoying pourovers to the left.

Like the neighboring coffee-shop owners, Eric saw a gap in the Yellowknife market: “The existing roaster in town hadn’t really capitalized on the interest in good-quality, organic, Fair-Trade, specialty coffees that exist elsewhere in Canada.” A roastery also promised the stay-at-home dad flexible hours. As a home roaster, Eric was familiar with the process—it was just a matter of doing it on a larger scale. The hardest part, he quickly discovered, was figuring out the roaster. “The Toper,” he explains, “is a very good roaster with a poorly translated manual.” Thankfully, Eric has been able to reach out to a helpful network of roasters scattered across British Columbia and Alberta.

Barren Ground prioritizes organic and ethically sourced beans, purchased through a distributor in Vancouver. Eric is working toward buying directly from growers—he has contacts in Costa Rica, Kenya, and India—though at present, volume and export licensing are barriers. Eric is still experimenting with different beans and roasts. Two current favorites are the Brazil Fazenda Saquarema, a slightly darker roast with notes of chocolate, baked peaches, and roasted coconut, and the Ethiopia Sidamo Guji, a lighter roast with a flavor profile notable for spice, caramel, and blueberries.

Though only in business for half a year, BGC is already in a number of stores around Yellowknife, as well as in other NWT communities. With local wholesale prices lower than what Eric pays for green beans, it’s been harder to break into the city’s restaurants, though you can order BGC at The Fat Fox and nearby Blachford Lake Lodge. One local business, the NWT Brewing Company, has found another way to support the fledgling enterprise. Owners Fletcher and Miranda Stevens asked Eric to provide coffee for their anniversary milk stout. Other collaborations are on the horizon, including bottled cold-press coffee with a Yellowknife eatery.

MAKING COFFEE IN THE NORTH

There are challenges peculiar to making a go of it in the North. Accessing products and materials is complicated and expensive because of Yellowknife’s distance from major urban centers. A lack of redundancy, both in terms of equipment and staff, makes operations precarious. Then there’s the astronomical cost of utilities. High electricity rates are particularly maddening because of the city’s frequent power outages. “I can’t tell you how many times the power has gone out and I’ve had to throw out trays of half-cooked scones,” Emma of the Fat Fox says. Eric has had similar experiences mid-roast, and Barren Ground’s aged pellet stove requires constant care to keep the shop above freezing, especially when it’s 30 below.

For all of the challenges, there are also benefits to starting a small business in Yellowknife. Without exception, everyone I spoke to credits a supportive community and an appetite for new things (novelty goes a long way in Yellowknife) to their early success. Now with so many other coffee shops and eateries competing for a finite number of customers, however, all have had to work hard to prove their worth, and will have to continue to do so. **b**