

PEOPLE

LOCAL LIVES PETER FERNIE

Peter Fernie runs the RoMo Coffee stall from the hallowed steps of St Marylebone Parish Church on Marylebone Road. He has been serving up fine coffee and conversation there for almost two years. Peter lives in Kennington.

My first experience of Italian culture and coffee was at the age of about 17, as a waiter in a family run restaurant in Cambridge called Trattoria Pasta Fresca. The Italians take their coffee very seriously, so a certain amount of passion and skill were required.

A couple of years later I found myself working for a guy who'd trained at The Savoy. Phil was a very competent chef and had been trusted by a financial backer in Cambridge to open a new restaurant. I knew him through a football acquaintance and he took me on as a junior commis chef. He was a bit of a maverick, and walked around the kitchen going: "Flavour! Taste! Contrast! Colour!" It could have worked two ways. You could be scared, and think: "Oh my God! The pressure", or just blossom. You start to understand how plates are put together. It was excellent.

I came to London for university but it didn't work out. I found myself back in the world of food and drink, spending three and a half years at a fast-paced cocktail bar on Bishopsgate called Prohibition, where I became head bartender.

A gentleman named Matt Bamber came in as general manager. He had done some training in Melbourne,



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where the coffee culture is fantastic. They are years ahead of us—a professional, skilled trade with baristas being paid a good wage. He schooled me a little, polishing off the rough edges.

After that I was a barista at King's College on the Strand. I cycled across Waterloo Bridge every day and saw these guys outside St John's Waterloo with their coffee cart out in the sunshine, looking happy about life. I spoke to the owner and a month and a half later I was working for him. I've had this coffee stall on the steps of St Marylebone Parish Church for almost two years now.

Most of my customers are local workers and students. The building next door is the NHS head office for Westminster, which has some 700 people. Luckily, I met some of them in my first few weeks. They enjoyed the coffee and decided to tell the entire office. I'm very grateful for that.

I have lots of regulars: a mad and eclectic mix of people, from paediatricians to NHS head office. I'm lucky enough to have the Royal Academy of Music next door too—some fantastically gifted musicians and wonderful personalities.

It would take me a lifetime to rack my brains as to the scale of what we talk about: from politics and social ills to football. I studied philosophy, so had a window into the technicalities of life. You get some extremely clever people who work in the theoretical side of health care and provision—statisticians working on number crunching. All these people are wonderful to talk to. Each have a different perspective, but are generally left leaning, which hits me in all the right places. I enjoy feeding off of these people, getting their vibe.

Most popular coffees—it's pretty split. Flat whites are the drink of the moment with trendy young people, and are widely associated with the technical revolution that's happened at Old Street. Silicon Roundabout—wonderful, isn't it? The US have Silicon Valley and we have Silicon

Roundabout. It's very British, understated and self-deprecating.

St Marylebone Parish Church—what an office. Nowhere else would you get as good view from your office window. Regent's Park, just down York Gate, flanked on either side by colonial buildings, the trees in the park, everything—it's fantastic. If you're having a bad morning, just stop and look for five minutes and you'll feel refreshed. We're in the middle of London, but look, greenery. Things live.

The church is beautiful too. I have a lot of respect for Father Stephen, the rector of the parish. His heart is in the right place and the work he does is fantastic, but there's a big team of people. The chaplaincy deals with local schools, colleges and hospitals, then there are people coming to preach. One of the priests I'm friendly with, Father Edward, who is relatively new, has lots of energy. I feed off people like that.

This time of year, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, is fantastic. When the temperature's right it's the best job in the world. Obviously the flip side of that is winter. I did that particularly fierce winter two years ago. We had prevailing easterly winds for about four months. One day it was around 15mph continuously and minus eight. The cloth that I use for cleaning froze. But summer is so good it usurps that discomfort.

What do I love most about my job? Making coffee. I'm so passionate about it, I love the whole thing. I love dealing with happy people. Sometimes people can be miserable. It's the nine-to-five drudge, and we have rain and sleet for eight months of the year. But most of the time people are a joy to speak to. Just standing in the street you wouldn't be able to speak to this many people without coming across as a bit odd, but I get to talk to everyone and they have an excuse to talk to me. You meet so many interesting people. So it's making the coffee and the people I meet—that's what makes my day.