

Michael Harwood's joy of java

BY VICTORIA BOULOUBASIS

Barista Michael Harwood is, in a sense, our tambourine man. Behind the bar at **Open Eye Cafe** on a winter morning, a pleasant jingle-jangle of a slim aluminum spoon against a wide open-mouthed porcelain mug meets the industrious whir of espresso machines. Harwood stands

excite them a little bit about what they're tasting," he explains.

His memory of last year's entry in the Signature Drink category echoes the descriptions found on a fine dining menu: "You have to listen to coffee, in a way, and let it tell you what it needs to be."



BARISTA MICHAEL HARWOOD AT OPEN EYE CAFE, CARRBORO

among the noise, his eyes fixed upon the machine as he pulls a shot of espresso, a deep brown, syrupy swirl. He won't look up until, with intent and a smile, he settles the cup onto the counter and pushes it toward your eager hands. You take a frothy sip, then the espresso hits you—and the caffeine blasts into your bloodstream. You get what you've been craving.

Harwood is a great barista; certified, in fact. He is 2011's Southeast Regional Barista Champion, a title he wears today on a T-shirt. A former student of dramatic arts, he sees it as a serious performance and testament to his craft.

"Judges have fairly sensitive palates," says Harwood. He works four barista shifts per week and in quality control and customer service at the **Carrboro Coffee Company**, which roasts beans for Open Eye and **Caffé Triade**. "I have to

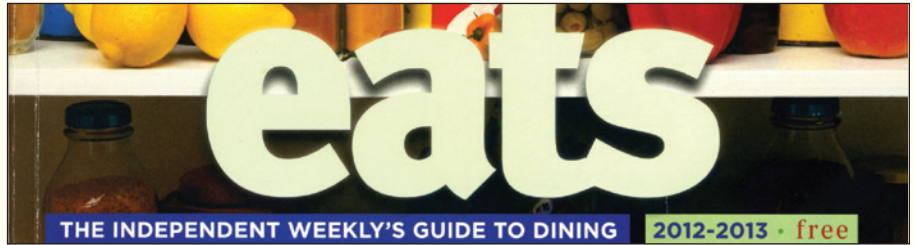
Last year, Harwood played off the natural citrus and honey caramel profile of the single-origin espresso from Honduras he used. (He travels to the countries where he buys the coffee beans.) He infused fresh-squeezed blood-orange juice with rosemary in a nitrix charger, then layered honey simple syrup and steamed milk onto the coffee.

Harwood's interest in coffee started in college at UNC-Chapel Hill. "I was attracted to preparing coffee initially because I drank it all the time out of my crappy little home setup," he says.

He soon upgraded to quality, specialty drinks at The Daily Grind on campus. "It was the first place where I noticed the baristas paying attention to pulling their shots," he says. "I would go in between classes to watch Lem [Butler]. And I started thinking, what's the difference? What does he know?"



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(Butler now works at Counter Culture and frequently competes with Harwood at regional contests.)

After graduation, Harwood took a stint at New York City's famed Sweetleaf coffee bar while pursuing a theater career. He returned home, he says, to "bug" Scott Canary at Carrboro Coffee Company to give him a job. He was hired at the store in Meadowmont before taking the reins at Open Eye and Driade.

His bona fides aside, Harwood is focused on service. Customer Jenny Lund, who doesn't know Harwood, says she frequents Open Eye for its quality coffee and because Harwood "is the nicest barista that works here."

"Most people are regulars," says Harwood. "We know what they want before they walk in the door. And if they're used to Starbucks, my goal is to never insult or belittle. It's to affirm what they want with what we offer. I recommend trying a sip of it black, and then do it however you want it. It makes me happy to



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have someone say that it's the first cup of black coffee they've really enjoyed. You just present a delicious product in a friendly way and it's amazing how many people come around."

His dedication to the craft has expanded to promoting the coffee culture throughout the region. The Southeast representative for the Barista Guild of America, Harwood says local coffee purveyors should stick together and advance the cause of quality, specialty, fairly traded coffee over commercial-grade purveyors.

"Even if this is my whole world," he says, "we're still the little guys."