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Ground BREAKERS

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and one carefully brewed, delicious cup of Joe*

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A Well-Balanced Business

Bard Coffee might look different—after an overhaul by designer Brett Johnson—but the ethos remains the same: good coffee, served by knowledgeable baristas in a welcoming space. **Here's how they do it.**

Bard Coffee, a beloved downtown coffee shop, has been experimenting with new ways to brew coffee since they opened. Here, barista Andrea Vasquez prepares a pour-over cup for a customer.

by Katy Kelleher Photography by Erin Little

“You want to let this settle like a beer,”

says manager and barista Brittany Feltovic as she sets down a cold glass of coffee. We're meeting at Bard Coffee in the Old Port, a local institution that recently received a modern facelift. At the urging of co-owner Bob Garver, Feltovic has brought over several brews for me to try. This one, which is settling silently in its glass, foam deflating slowly into the rich, dark liquid, is a nitro brew. After a moment, I take a sip. You know how in *The Nutcracker*, a ballerina representing coffee takes the stage, moving like liquid to Tchaikovsky's classic score? This coffee tastes like that. Rich, exotic, and very, very smooth.

Opposite: Manager and barista Brittany Feltovic draws a pour from the nitro taps. Like a good beer, these coffees take a moment to settle.





"We want you to leave just bouncing out the door," jokes Garver as Felovics steps away from the table to prepare another caffeinated drink. I wonder if this is perhaps the reason behind Felovics's bubbly manner—she certainly must drink a lot of coffee—but soon I realize that her upbeat charm belies a serious intellect. From Hondarzas Bertilio to organic Cameroon Oku, Felovics, like all of Bard's baristas, knows her coffee.

And it's no wonder: the staff learns from some of the best in the business. Bob and Carmen Garver, the married couple behind Bard Coffee, have spent years researching this particular form of liquid gold. They've turned this neighborhood coffee shop into a leader of the local coffee movement, where they serve up innovative brews in inventive ways. Their nitro cold brew, for example, is poured through a Guinness tap and features a "bold, smooth, and silky texture," as Garver describes it. I soon

learn that this coffee has been cold brewed for over 12 hours before it is put in a keg and charged with nitrogen, then left to infuse for three days. After that, the baristas carefully tap the keg and pull it, creating a smooth pour with a very small "head," as it would be called in the beer world.

"One of my favorite things about the redesign is how it's given us space to have more taps," Felovics notes, pointing to the space behind the low-set bar. There, three gleaming silver taps offer an array of beverage options. As Portland patrons of the coffee shop will recall, the counter used to be high, which created a visual barrier that cut off the baristas from customers. Not only does the revamped space provide for better customer interactions, it also feels more open, warm, and inviting.

Although the Garvers and Felovics all had a hand in updating the shop, much of the

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behind-the-scenes work was done by interior designer Brett Johnson, a close friend of the Garvers and owner of Maine Street Design Co. "We knew for years that the environment didn't quite match the quality of the product," admits Garver. Bard Coffee had been open since early 2009, and for the first six years of business, the decor remained fairly stagnant. "Bob is a world-class coffee expert," says Johnson. "Bard Coffee has a remarkable story to tell, and when they asked me to help them tell this story, I was incredibly excited." In May 2015, following months of conversations between the Bard Coffee crew and Maine Street Design Co., the shop closed for one week. When it reopened, everything had changed, from the flooring to the light fixtures to the mugs.

"I took my inspiration from Bob and Carmen's home on Bailey Island," Johnson says of his design choices. "I knew what they liked—Scandinavian, clean design, with a mid-century-



The recent redesign, which was spearheaded by designer Brett Johnson, opened up the space, creating more areas for group work, private study, or social gatherings over coffee. Near the front window is a large table, which can be shared by several groups at once. **Opposite:** Owners Bob and Carmen Garver have strived to create a business based on the principles of hospitality.



In addition to coffee, Bard also serves a small selection of pastries. Opposite: The blue and orange color scheme continues outside, with brightly colored chairs. In the summer, these tables are much sought after for their people-watching potential.





modern feel—and I wanted to showcase that here.” To this end, he chose a color scheme of calming grays and warm oranges offset by funky touches of turquoise, an accent shade suggested by Feltovic. In addition to rebuilding the counter, they also replaced the flooring, swapped out the old four-top tables for smaller two-seaters that can easily be pushed together to accommodate larger groups, and added a family-style table in the front window. The wall space displays nine of Garver’s photographs taken during his research trips to coffee farms in Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

“We talk about balance a lot when we talk about tasting coffee,” says Garver. “But balance is also important to us in terms of how we approach our business.” While for a long time Garver focused solely on the coffee, he eventually realized it was important to complement gastronomic choices with aesthetic

ones to create a seamless experience. “As soon as our customers walk through the door, we want them to know how grateful we are that they are here,” he adds. Although some customers were disappointed to see the Garvers do away with the old, faded couches that occupied one corner of the room, even regulars quickly adapted to the new layout, which allows for more workspace and collaboration.

It was also very important to Bard’s owners that they include local products in the redesign. “They don’t just talk the talk—they really walk the walk,” says Johnson. “They’re invested in paying a living wage and really supporting their employees. They also wanted the space to represent and reflect their connection to Maine.” To that end, Johnson sourced wood from Maine Heritage Timber in Millisnocket for the tabletops and hired Rusted Puffin Metal Works in Portland’s West End to create the high-top table bases. At the Maine Potters

“We want to provide the highest levels of customer service and let our customers know that we are grateful they are here as soon as they walk through the door,” explains Bob Garver. Perhaps that’s why people keep coming back, time and again, to this Old Port establishment.

“Ultimately, what drew all of us into this business isn’t the coffee itself—it’s what happens over coffee.”

Market, Feltovic found ceramics by Elizabeth Louden in bright blue tones and modern chevron patterns. Now, you can sip coffee from far-flung locales like Brazil, Peru, or Indonesia from a locally designed mug, sitting at a table made from reclaimed Maine timbers.

But all these little details, from Johnson’s thoughtful design to the owners’ well-researched brews, are supposed to fade into the background. Whether you’re enjoying a cold, smooth mug of nitro at the high-top bar or sipping a hot, foamy cappuccino while cozied up at a corner table, Bard’s owners want you to feel right at home. “We love coffee and that’s our focus. We are focused on that so you don’t have to be,” says Garver. “Ultimately, what drew all of us into this business isn’t the coffee itself—it’s what happens over coffee. It’s about the conversations you have and the connections you make. Coffee brings people together. And we love being a part of that ritual.”