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New Coffee Shop Brings Yemen's Renowned Coffee and Little-Known Culture to the Upper West Side

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Photographs by Claire Davenport.

By Claire Davenport

Basheer Shahbain, owner of the Moka & Co. coffee shop that opened on Broadway between West 92nd and 93rd Streets this month, hopes that his business will bring Upper West Siders a new understanding of his homeland.

“Today, Yemen is known as a war-torn country. But it has a lot of other things to offer,” Shahbain told West Side Rag.

Coffee is one of those things, but in addition to describing the food and drink offerings at Moka & Co., Shahbain talked about a shared cultural heritage that inspired his choice of location.

Shahbain says he chose the UWS location in part because it is one of the places where Jews migrating from Yemen eventually settled when they came to New York City years ago.

“A lot of people don’t know that Jews lived in Yemen,” he explained. “Jews and Arabs lived in Yemen for many years in peace, and it is an important thing to show and remember – especially at a time when Arabs and Jews are being depicted as adversaries in the media.”

Shalom Staub, author of the book “Yemenis in New York City: The Folklore of Ethnicity,” confirmed to WSR that many Yemeni Jews left for Israel after it was declared a state in 1948, and many from that movement later emigrated to New York in the 1970s.

Shahbain sees this history, even if fractured, as something worth celebrating. “As we set up the shop, Jewish people in the neighborhood have stopped by and told me their relatives are Yemeni,” he said.



The Broadway shop is the second New York City location for Moka & Co., which was started in Michigan and also has a location in Astoria, Queens, a block from the stretch of Steinway Street renowned for its Middle Eastern fare. The Broadway storefront was previously occupied by Telio, a Greek restaurant that relocated to Columbus Avenue at West 85th Street. A map of Moka’s current locations across the country can be found on their website [here](#).

Shahbain was born in Yemen and as a child, immigrated with his family to the U.S. in 1989. A nurse practitioner by training, he said he'd always been business-minded and dreamed of elevating Yemeni coffee in global cities like Detroit and New York.

“At one point, Yemen was the sole distributor of coffee to the rest of the world,” he noted. “It’s basically what Yemen is known for.”

Moka & Co is named after the Yemeni port city of Mocha. According to [many accounts](#), the coffee plant was first commercialized in Yemen in the 1400s and spread through the Ottoman Empire and into Europe.



At Moka & Co, patrons can purchase regional drinks – like Turkish coffee and Adeni chai (black tea and heavy cream, spiced with cardamom and named for the port city of Aden) – along with classics like matcha lattes and caramel macchiatos. Also on offer are an array of fusion sweets, from pistachio mousse to the buttery Yemeni pastry sabaya.

Shahbain said some Moka & Co. prices are higher than at nearby chain coffeehouses (a signature spiced latte is \$9) because of the difficulties sourcing their specialty beans from Yemen. “It involves us going to Yemen and negotiating with the farmers. It’s a difficult process, especially given conditions on the ground,” he said, noting the country’s ongoing, 10-year-old war.



Customer Ed Newman.

On opening day last week, customers arrived into the early evening to try out Moka & Co. coffees, made with beans sourced directly from Yemen and spices from the region, like cardamom, saffron, and ginger. One early patron, Ed Newman, said he lives close by and had watched the construction progress at the storefront. Newman, a lawyer, photographer, and self-professed coffee aficionado, said he always welcomes new spots for coffee. “Without caffeine, I might forget my pants in the morning,” he said.

He declared his iced mufawar coffee – a traditional specialty spiced with cardamom – “scrumptious” and said he’d probably be back the following morning for more. “If it wasn’t 7:15 in the evening, I’d have another,” he said.

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