



The smoked salmon plate



SIP The Experience coffee lounge



SIP on these frothy drinks.

PHOTOS/SPARK ST. JUDE

DRINK IT IN

New coffee shop opens in Lindbergh City Center

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Monopolies aren't democratic, but in the United States, "coffee shop" has come to mean Starbucks. I believe that particular company's success has more to do with location than its menu: Glance around any busy intersection, airport concourse or shopping mall and you'll likely see that green-and-white circular logo.

Starbucks' coffee drinks range from bitter to fattening and are arguably overpriced, but I drink them because at times, like when I'm stuck on the T-concourse waiting for a 6 a.m. flight to Miami, there aren't really any better options.

Any entrepreneur hoping to break into the coffee shop business is wise to take a page from the Starbucks playbook—and the right page to tear out is the one about location. By positioning SIP The Experience near the MARTA Lindbergh station in the growing Lindbergh City Center, owner April Phillips is guaranteed to attract customers. Smart move. Even better, and what will help draw return customers, is a menu featuring far tastier coffee than what's available at her biggest competitor, plus food offerings beyond muffins and cookies.

Designed by local design firm ai3, SIP The Experience boasts a hip, contemporary feel. The walls are painted a dark chocolate brown and are adorned with artwork that's for sale—currently several brightly colored still life paint-

ings and framed 3-D pieces with ethnic themes. Furnishings include tables of brown wood and white laminate and brown wicker and upholstered chairs made of white acrylic and lime green. White tile and stainless steel light fixtures brighten the space.

On a recent Monday around 10:30 a.m., four patrons alternately slurp coffee and tap on laptop keyboards. Six others are dressed in business attire and sit in a circle, debating the cost/benefit of some strategic alliance. Two women holding large drinks chat on the cushioned outdoor bench. I snag a corner table near an electrical outlet.

The menu is posted on a large chalkboard. I ask for a decaf café au lait and am informed that it's impossible to get that drink in decaffeinated form. A blonde server suggests that I try a decaf Americano with steamed milk as a substitute. Fine. Before I log on to the free wireless network, the drink arrives in a tall ceramic mug positioned on a saucer. Paper cups are available, but it seems more elegant to drink from actual drinkware. The coffee is rich and smooth without a strong bitter note.

The blended Coffee Turtle Latte is SIP's answer to the frappuccino. Topped with whipped cream and caramel sauce, it's guilt in a plastic cup for anyone counting calories. But its mild flavor is yummy and refreshing.

SIP focuses on small-lot sustainability and fairly traded coffee varieties and features roasted coffee beans from Counter Culture, an award-winning company based in North Carolina. All

of SIP's coffee drinks are made using the French press brewing method that puts coffee grounds in direct contact with the brewing water. French press coffee is usually stronger, thicker and has more sediment than drip-brewed coffee; it's also typically more flavorful, since more of the coffee's essential oils are captured.

SIP's beverage menu includes the full range of traditional options, from espresso and cappuccino to unique items like the Mayan espresso shooter (espresso, chocolate, vanilla and whipped cream) and lavender-pistachio hot chocolate, as well as whole-leaf teas, boutique wines and small craft beers. The short list of light bites includes stone-ground grits, grilled cheese and quiche of the day for breakfast and a cheese board, antipasto plate, smoked salmon and hummus flatbread throughout the day and evening. I opt for the croque monsieur and watch as it's assembled and then cooked in a toaster oven on the back service counter. Served open-faced, the soft baguette is topped with two thin slices of deli ham, tomato, basil and melted gruyère cheese. It's tasty but lukewarm, and lacks the traditional crunch. Coffee is clearly the focus here.

With SIP The Experience, Phillips caters to coffee's Third Wave movement in Atlanta; its followers revere small, local, independent coffee shops, quality coffee beans and the talented baristas who create crave-worthy drinks. If SIP succeeds, Atlanta's streets may one day boast more independent coffee shops than national chains. That would be great news for capitalism. **SP**



Soft baguette sandwich with prosciutto, formaggio and basil with raspberry preserves



April Phillips, owner of SIP The Experience

DINING ESSENTIALS

SIP The Experience
Lindbergh City Center
528 Main St.
404-816-3001
www.siptheexperience.com

Hours: Open Mon.–Thu. 7 a.m.–10 p.m.; Fri. 7 a.m.–midnight; and Sat. 8 a.m.–midnight. Closed Sundays.

Reservations: No

Dress Code: Casual

Cuisine: Coffee bar with light bites

Alcohol: Beer and wine

Smoking: Outdoors

Cost: \$1.75 and up

Credit Cards: Visa and MasterCard

Outdoor Seating: Patio

Parking: Free for up to two hours in the Garson parking deck and for up to 15 minutes in front of the restaurant.