Espresso trend offers alternative to alcohol

By Katherine Johns
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It's Friday night on High Street, and a steady stream of people are headed to the bars for a night of drinking.

This may sound typical, but there is a slight difference — these bars serve espresso and lattes, not alcohol.

Gourmet coffee is fast becoming a national craze, and campus-area merchants and students have been quick to jump on the bandwagon.

"The business has picked up lately," said Scott Morse, owner of Yogurt Oasis, 1860 N High St. "The demand for coffee has increased nationally, so we added coffee bars to our stores in the West. It worked out so well, we decided to implement them here in Columbus."

The Specialty Coffee Association of America reported that gourmet coffee sales have increased nationally from $210 million to $800 million in the last 10 years. The association predicts the number of gourmet coffee retailers will jump from 1,000 in 1989 to 2,500 by 1999.

Opinions differ on why gourmet coffee has become so popular.

Ann Blake, co-owner of Especially Espresso, 2106 N. High St., believes the new trend toward de-glomorizing alcohol is bringing back coffee as a social drink.

"People need an alternative to bars for social drinking," Blake said. "They need a place to go from early in the morning until late at night, where they can enjoy healthy food and a good environment."

Customers range from "serious espresso drinkers" to people curious about the new trend, she said.

It is the high profit margin that makes coffee such a high-volume business, said Mark Gabbay, part-owner of Insomnia Espresso Bar, 1728 N. High St.

Blake said Especially Espresso buys its espresso beans from a local company for about $6 per pound, or 21 cents per cup. The store charges 75 cents for a cup of espresso.

Gabbay said he and his partners decided to open Insomnia in July because "there were no good, large-size, coffee shops catering to students who want somewhere to hang out."

Response from students has been good, with over 500 people visiting Insomnia each day, he said.

Doug Hughes, a sophomore majoring in biology and a self-proclaimed "serious coffee drinker," said he goes to Insomnia between classes to relax on the outside patio and enjoy the best coffee on campus. Hughes said the recent renewed interest in the coffee business has nostalgic value.

"It's a return to the '50s when coffeehouses were big — the beatniks used to get together and philosophize there," Hughes said. "Now in the '90s people are returning to the early '50s and '60s attitudes."

The trend began on the West Coast and is just beginning in Columbus, said Mary Klein, assistant manager of Caffe Fino, in the Ohio Union. She moved Caffe Fino from Berkeley, Ca., because she wanted a market "less saturated" than those of California, Oregon and Ann Arbor, Mich.

"The response has been extremely positive," Klein said. "In fact, we have customers who were students at Berkeley who come here now."

Brooke Leist, a junior majoring in education, said she drinks coffee because it keeps her awake, and Caffe Fino is her favorite place because it's cheap."