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INTERNATIONAL

Latte lovers left frothing over coffee wars

Stephen Collinson | Washington, United States

20 June 2005 09:56

Radical latte lovers are getting the bean rolling in a new campaign against big brand coffee giants like Starbucks.

In a new and frothy front in the struggle to turn back globalisation, United States coffee lovers are being offered the chance to wean themselves off what critics deride as the same blends and decor of big coffee chains.

A new web service designed to promote under-pressure independent cafes allows users to simply input a zip or postal code, before providing them with a list of local independent cafes where they can sip a designer coffee.

A search on the site, known as delocator (www.delocator.net) of the 20005 zip code for Washington DC, throws up 52 local independently-run cafes in a eight-kilometre square downtown area, matching up against 64 Starbucks premises.

A similar survey for downtown Seattle, the west coast cradle of Starbucks and spiritual home of the designer coffee boom, throws up 72 cafes and a staggering 126 Starbucks coffehouses.

Cafes are "vital social outposts" which have nourished "artists, hipsters, musicians, activists, intellectuals, radicals and others alike", according to the delocator mission statement.

Global giants like Starbucks, Diedrich, the Coffee Bean, and Tea Leaf are accused of squelching idiosyncracies of independent



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cafes in favour of the standardised food, drinks, sounds, smells of out-of-the-box coffee houses.

The delocator site is the brainchild of xtine Hanson, a member of an artist's collective based in California, who balked at the brand-name takeover of an eclectic corner of New York.

"We were visiting New York City and we were in Soho and I was like 'I can't believe I can't find a non Starbucks cafe in Soho!'" said Hanson.

Hanson hopes foreign coffee lovers will be inspired by her example and will download codes from her site to help them set up their own databases for cities around the world.

"I am really hoping that somebody does that, to me that would be success," she said.

One of the Starbucks stores targeted by the delocator site in Washington nestles a few blocks from the White House, and had a typical queue of customers one lunchtime last week.

A similar queue snaked away from the counter at the delocator alternative, "Firehook," just across the road, that offers a range of high quality breads, and the full array of designer coffees to customers in its cosy back room.

"We try to be a neighbourhood coffee house, in the different neighbourhoods, [the cafe] has a different feel depending on that neighbourhood," said Tracey Miller, manager of this and eight other independent Firehook cafes in chain.

Starbucks did not return calls for comment on the delocator project, though Hanson insisted it was not targeted directly at the chain, and would pull it down if there were any complaints.

Starbucks Coffee Company, founded in Seattle in 1971, famed for its distinctive white paper cups and green logo, is well on its way to becoming one of the world's most recognisable brands.

The ubiquitous chain has thousands of stores in the United States and a further 1 500 dotted around 31 overseas markets, including Australia, Hong Kong, mainland China, Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand and Britain, the first of which was a store in Tokyo which opened in 1996.

While delocator gives Starbucks a bad rap, even some in the independent sector admit that the firm, by popularising speciality coffees, may actually have boosted the trade of independent coffee houses by educating customers about new varieties.

"They have helped it ... they certainly have a great product," said Miller. - Sapa-AFP

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