



ECHT Coffeehouse is the start of something real in Mount Oliver

good craftsmanship



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A coffeehouse opening Monday in Mount Oliver is much more than a coffeehouse.

Its name is Echt, pronounced *esht*, which is German for authentic, genuine, real. And the Echt Coffeehouse has stories behind it, and in front of it, that are really interesting.

The space is in one corner of the first floor of the former fire station in this tiny borough surrounded by the city of Pittsburgh atop the South Side Slopes. The big building is a block off the main drag of Brownsville Road, which in the early 1900s was a thriving business district.

This building was purchased in 2016 for \$100,000 by Jörg Gerlach, an

M.D. and Ph.D. from Germany who moved from Berlin in 2002 to work as a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh's McGowan Institute for Regenerative Medicine. One of his projects was growing human cells and combining them with synthetic materials to create a temporary external device to support the functions of an ailing liver. Another was a "skin gun" for spraying cells to heal burned skin.



Exterior of Echt Coffeehouse in Mount Oliver occupies the first floor of a former fire station.
(Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)

But he also has a deep interest in old-school craftsmanship — the making, by hand, of useful and beautiful things. So the first thing he did with part of this 15,000 square feet of space is build a workshop, where he and some fellow craftspeople began turning metal, wood and local glass into the custom windows, railings, light fixtures and furniture for outside clients as well as for this building. He named it Echt, with a handmade steel sign, and painted the exterior white, with accents of the concept's signature blue and orange.

Three years ago, neighbors could peer into new stained glass windows along Penn and wonder what was going to happen inside and when. A website gave tastes of what was to come — not only Echt Contracting but also Echt Coffeehouse, even a distillery called Echt Liquor Lab. You could order imported clothing and other handcrafted items. But overall, Echt would be about making experiences, whatever that means.

Dr. Gerlach and his team — now numbering eight — have been quietly, so to speak, hammering and forging, sawing and welding. The coffeehouse opening its custom-cut glass and steel French doors is the start of hosting the public, so people really can get their minds around the concept of Echt.

The custom shelving, stools and counters are not just functional but also meant to provide design inspiration for people who might order their own commissions from the workshop next door. Customers will walk through a brick archway into the studio to use the restrooms, which craftspeople built right down to the concrete sinks and copper fixtures.

“The idea is to use the coffeehouse to explain what we’re doing in here,” says Dr. Gerlach, leading a tour through the rambling three-story space in his tattered insulated work coverall.

He doesn’t look like a medical researcher, and he knows not many of those also love to forge and weld. But he says that when he was in high school, he had an interest in architecture, and even early in his medical career, he renovated and rehabbed a house and an old apartment building in Berlin. Making a stair railing isn’t that different than making a skin gun. “To me, it’s not a disconnect,” he says. “I was always interested in art and design.” He fell in love with Pittsburgh’s old textures, but that’s not the only reason he’s stayed.



James Tyler checks phone messages in the Mount Oliver establishment Echt Coffeehouse.
(Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)

Running the coffeehouse is his much-better-dressed partner James Tyler, a Johnstown-area native who was working at Shadyside Hospital when they met. He retired after a career of working as a critical care nurse and in the gastro-intestinal lab. Now he's serving very high-end espresso drinks made with Ethiopian Yirgacheffe and Sidamo beans, thanks to the cutting-edge espresso machine and roaster that are built into a house-crafted waxed steel island and shelving. In addition to a range of espresso drinks, he'll offer some bistro fare, both approachable and unusual.

The menu and the overall experience will be based on the men's travels that included visiting coffeehouses in North Africa, the Middle East and Europe. "As a person of color living in America, I want the food to have some soul, too," says Mr. Tyler. Cooking with him will be Tevin James.

"People are going to come because the space is fabulous," Mr. Tyler pronounces as he and consultant Paul Sief literally dial in the roast and grind and water pressure for the espresso.

Mr. Tyler also is heading the "micro distillery," which is in the basement below, down an artfully crafted spiral staircase. Inside a steel cage there are some aging small barrels of rum they distilled from raw Venezuelan sugar,

with some help from local distiller Blake Ragghianti. They plan to use their copper pot still to make rye from Pennsylvania grain and other spirits, but those will take time to make and finish.

It's totally Echt that Dr. Gerlach had bottles with logos made in Germany out of salt-glazed ceramics — the kind that German immigrants brought to the New World centuries ago and that “you now find in museums.” Even empty, they are substantially beautiful.

The future plan is for guests to be able to carry a house-distilled and -made drink with them up another steel-and-glass spiral staircase to the second floor, where the owners are putting in another high-end kitchen so they can host chefs and food events. Also up there are the beginnings of a gallery that now displays Echt's line of contemporary tiles and hardware and other items, and could display artworks by other local artists.

Dr. Gerlach and company also bought the former G.C. Murphy department store on Brownsville Road and have started to transform this “Building II” into workshop and gallery spaces for dozens of artists. It's to have its own coffeehouse and bar.

There's also a Building III and more to come, even a guest house — it, too, a working Echt showpiece, for visiting craftspeople and artists from around the world.

It all starts Monday with coffee but, as you would expect if you've read this far, not just any coffee. Look for the notes of citrus, nuts and chocolate in the Sidamo, Mr. Seif says, setting a just-made espresso on a rectangular glass plate. It was in the former five-and-dime store that they found a trove of these vintage luncheon plates, and they found that a notch once meant for cigarettes is perfect for cradling a demitasse spoon.

On the plate with a double espresso (\$4) go a mineral water (still or sparkling) chaser, a complement such as a housemade cookie or piece of chocolate, a couple of those coffee beans and — for the *con panna* of the week — housemade whipped cream and other ingredients for the guest to add to taste, including cacao powder, confectioners' sugar, and a selection of dried spices, dried fruits and botanicals (\$6).

Roasted coffee beans at Echt Coffeehouse.
(Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)

“It’s not something we’re doing to be showy,” Mr. Seif says. They want to collaborate with their customers, who also can just grab and go with a drip coffee of the day (\$2). Though it still won’t be just any coffee. He says, “It’s going to be an experience and an experiment.”

The menu will grow and evolve, but on it for the opening, in addition to a range of espresso drinks, are fresh juices and smoothies (\$4 and \$6) as well as breakfast and brunch items, possibly including Bircher muesli, served hot or cold (\$4), savory French toast (\$7) and a weekly Ploughman’s lunch (\$12).

Borough Manager Rick Hopkinson believes Echt will be a destination for residents as well as people visiting Pittsburgh. “It’s going to be a game-changer in this area.”

It already has been: He remembers when he was worried that the empty former firehouse would have to be demolished. When in 2015 he met Dr. Gerlach, “I could see the passion,” he says, and he’s seen it all along, and he looks forward to future phases of the project, which will unfold over several years. “Everything Jörg does, he does well.”

Dr. Gerlach says the Echt experience will be guided by people in Mount Oliver and beyond, always with a high bar set for authenticity but also with some humility and genuine warmth.

“In a year, the place may have a cool concept,” he says, grinning big when he repeats, “May.”

The Echt Coffeehouse is at 107 Penn Ave., Mount Oliver, 15210. Starting hours are 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily but closed Tuesdays. A grand opening is to happen later. Learn more at <https://echt-coffee.com>. From there you can explore the other aspects of Echt.

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