

Waiter! Waiter! Why We're Still Waiting for Café Culture in Philadelphia

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“Waiter! Waiter! Beniamino, the service here is terrible...” she says. It’s then that I remind my Italian friend that in this Starbucks “café,” there is no waiter. You’ve got to go to the counter, and they’ll give you your coffee in a paper cup. Rosella says something unpleasant in Sicilian dialect, and then asks me what the hell a *grande* is. You see, in Italy — where there are real cafés — there’s no *grande*. You have a few coffee options, and that’s it — and that’s OK, because the coffee is great.

Why are there no real cafés in Philadelphia, and why is that important? Like most things, café culture — or the lack thereof — really stands for something else. Europeans, especially the French and Italians, love speaking in metaphor anyway. So I will carry on that tradition in explaining the grand metaphor of the café, with its waiters in clean white shirts and pressed black pants, exuding not too much patience, but a great deal of charming world-weariness.

Yes, I am an American. But I spent well over a decade overseas, and frankly, I’ve hung out in many cafés, arguing philosophy and otherwise trying to act cool, like the Europeans I saw around me. At Williams College, we had a name for those students who went abroad for their junior year and came back like that; we called them *Euro-trash*. Yes, I became one of them. I’ve spent plenty of time in Rome, Florence, Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Istanbul, and other locales, and in each place, I passed many a happy hour in the local cafés. I enjoyed the delights of a smooth *espresso* in Italy, a stiff *bica* in Portugal, tasty *churros* dipped in a cup of pure hot chocolate in Spain, a satisfying *café au lait* in Paris, and fragrant *çay* served in a delicate tulip-shaped glass in Turkey.

To be sure, in America, you can get an *espresso* too, but you’re also exposed to some really bastardized drinks, courtesy of Starbucks. True, the corporate giant has been enormously successful proffering drinks that sound European — *grande latte* and all that — but they are about as continental as hot dogs. Also, the coffee at these corporate simulacra of cafés is horrendous. I’ve read about how Starbucks buys the best beans, but

their coffee is really just not good. There are better American brands, such as Pete's Coffee and Seattle's Best Coffee, but when it actually comes to getting a truly European-style cup, you're not going to find it easily here. The closest thing I've had is the coffee in Toronto's Italian and Portuguese neighborhoods.

But of course it's the culture not the coffee I'm talking about here. Europe abounds in actual cafés where you can stop, spend an afternoon, drink coffee or something harder, have a snack, read, chat, debate, or watch passersby. The waiters are almost always men and almost always abrupt, but they're professionals — people who serve customers for a living, for a lifetime. They can be rude or snobby, but at least they are *real*. In America, we don't have professional waiters — just students, actors, and other people working as waiters, on their way to a "better" career.

In Paris and Rome, you'll find cafés all over the place. How do they all stay in business? Part of it is the fact that there still are small businesses in Europe. In America, even cafés face corporate competition nowadays. European café owners are content with a modest living for the sake of their independence and the joy of serving their customers — businessmen, students, tourists, or pensioners with nothing to do except nurse a drink and read the papers. Forget wireless access; Europeans don't need a reason to idle at a café.

Idling. That's something we seem only to do in our cars in this country. Sure, we hang out in bars, but American bars often dark, almost covert places, where we retreat rather than engage the world that is passing by, as one might do in an outdoor café.

The problem here also concerns class. In a true European café, you'll find all classes of people: the snooty old woman with her poodle held tight, delicately drinking a cup of tea; the gruff laborer enjoying a cool beer after a hot day's work; the reedy philosophy student from the *Université de Paris*. Despite what we say about the egalitarianism of American society, there aren't that many places these days where the classes mix that way. Starbucks tends to be filled with nervous suburbanites, and the sidewalk cafés in posh areas of Philadelphia such as Rittenhouse Square tend to be filled with... yes, posh people — or at least, posh posers.

Another factor is the size of apartments. In Europe and most other highly urbanized parts of the world, people simply don't have a lot of living space. In Rome or Paris or Lisbon or half-a-dozen other such cities, middle-class people live in quite modern but also quite crowded circumstances. Whatever the drawbacks, this kind of lifestyle has one very positive effect: *it gets people outside*.

Then there's time — or lack of it. Americans are said to spend more time on the job than any other culture. That either means we're working too hard just to stay where we are in socio-economic terms, or it means we're not working efficiently. We ridicule Europeans for their shorter work weeks and longer vacations. When I worked in Europe, it was standard practice to stop working mid-morning to pop out to the café for a chat and an espresso. But somehow European companies are producing products and providing services without compelling their employees to work overtime. In any case, the excessive hours that Americans spend working mean that many fewer hours at the café. Want coffee? Have it in the office, so you can get right back to work. Every American office has the coffee pot — or a whole mini-kitchen or even an on-site cafeteria. The mere idea of actually leaving the office for a break is taboo. In the afternoon, same deal.

Americans also have difficulty with the idea of sitting at a café and doing *nothing*. For Americans, time is a precious commodity that must be spent doing *something* — work, hobbies, home repair, or a workout at the gym. By contrast, even in Asia, where the work ethic is legendary, I noticed that the Taiwanese spent a lot of weekday afternoons just sitting around and having tea and a snack. Even in Japan, you'll find many cafés and coffeehouses where people are taking a break from the office, sipping a beverage and browsing a magazine.

Cultures in Europe, Africa, and Asia also value conversation itself, something for which true café culture provides the perfect environment. Americans' vanished ability to engage in and enjoy conversation has been noted by observers like Stephen Miller (*Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*) and Robert Putnam ("Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital").

Philadelphia in some ways seems the perfect place to develop a real café culture. We've got beautiful small streets with great architecture and broad French-style boulevards. More and more restaurants offer outdoor dining, from Pine Street to Walnut Street and beyond. But the key ingredient is still missing. We lack a culture that's really ready to ease up a little, to mix classes a bit, to engage in low-key conversation over some good coffee. We're too hyped-up on some super-sized drink from Starbucks, rushing back to the office or into our SUV. Creating a café culture is no mere matter of: "If you build them, they will come." It's a case of: "Slow down, and the café culture will arise." Until we start to live differently, we'll have to continue going to Europe for that sublime charm.
