

## Cup a Joe brews up good times and great coffee

We came in, breathed a sigh of relief, and choked on smoke filled air. Christina and I walked into the Cup a Joe on Hillsborough Street to review, to relax and to have a mug full of the soothing addictive drug, caffeine. That night our mission was to compare the old Cup a Joe with the new one at Mission Valley.

If you have never been to Cup a Joe the first thing you will notice are the mix-matched tables and chairs. You can sit on anything from an old airplane seat to a school desk to a Brady Bunch style flowered vinyl chair. There are designated smoking and non-smoking sides. But you probably would never guess it because the smoking side is three times as large. The smoke is part of what the Cup a Joe atmosphere is.

Christina and I placed our order, which was taken on a small yellow post-it note, and we drooled over the great selection of desserts and breads on the counter. There were such scrumptious items as croissants, white chocolate/walnut cookies, danishes, muffins, iced brownies, chocolate cheesecake and scones. The prices ranged from \$.93 to \$2.99. This particular night they were featuring rice krispie treats that were cut not into squares but into bricks (we're serious — the little pigs could build a house with these things!).

Christina ordered the mocha latte (\$1.25), and I ordered the hot chocolate (\$1.60) made with Ghiradelli chocolate. Drink prices range from \$.70 for plain coffee to \$1.85 for cafe copa. Many of these hot drinks are also offered with the "skinny" option (skim milk in place of the regular cream) or on ice, including Italian and French sodas for a change of pace. The drinks are served in heavy ceramic mugs that require two hands to hold them while you drink.

On the counter, while we waited for our drinks to arrive, we added our change to the tip teapot and checked out the Elvis memorabilia on the wall: a bumper sticker exclaiming "Elvis is my co-pilot," posters, postcards, and other items that created an Elvis shrine. The best item in the collection is a bust of Elvis that sits on the counter much like Beethoven sits on Schroder's

### Teresa Latham and Christina Peoples Coffee house review

piano. (We think Elvis is a kind of Cup a Joe muse!)

After we grabbed our drinks, we searched out a free table and ended up in the smoking section (shock). The difficulty of finding a table is one of the normal activities during a visit to Cup a Joe. At 9:30 p.m. there were approximately 70 people crowding into this smoky space, and we felt quite at home.

Once we found seats, Christina and I had time to examine our surroundings including the wide variety of people who make up the clientele. The customers ranged from frat boys (usually trying to sober up after a trip to Pantana Bob's) to random people off the street. There are varying degrees of weirdness. Some of the eccentricities we noticed were black slip dresses from the 20's, dramatic tatoos in strange places, Birkenstocks, creatively placed body jewelry, knee socks, army boots, crystals, big jeans, fatigues, and flannel shirts. There appears to be no right or wrong in what you can wear — anything goes! However, compared to the rest of the customers, Christina and I were the weirdest ones there because we lacked most of these outstanding features.

Along with observing the interesting clientele, we eavesdropped on several "hip" conversations featuring sex, parties, chess moves and philosophy. There was one guy there who looked like a member of Alabama, and his buddy had the starved, desperate look of an ex-con. Ironically, they were playing an intense game of chess.

We continued to sip on our chosen beverages, and Christina (ever the English major) pronounced "Ah java, ah humanity." After another sip of my hot chocolate, Christina laughed when I said, "Ya gotta love this whipped cream."

Having no money for dessert, we stared longingly at the guy at the next table. We were both thinking the same thing as he lifted his fork to his mouth, "Damn, he's got the cheesecake."

Cup a Joe offers many distractions

for its customers while they drink their coffee. There are chess boards and cards available. They offer a selection of newspapers, and posters advertising bands, jobs, and parties surround the room for your reading pleasure.

On both sides of the building there are large windows facing Hillsborough Street, which are great for people watching. There are huge sacks of coffee beans next to a large contraption that we assume is a coffee grinder, but we are unsure of its proper function. The bathrooms are surprisingly clean and stocked with toilet paper and antibacterial soap.

Next to the bathrooms is the personal/public phone. It is not unusual for a customer to get a call, and whoever answers the phone will shout the name of the person being requested in a sort of pseudo-paging system.

On our way out, we noticed the permanent "Help Wanted" sign hanging out front. I got a kick out of the "No Loitering" sign because there were people sitting outside directly under it (in unknowing defiance).

We jumped in my Ford Escort (the "Silver Bullet") and zoomed (NOT!) out of the parking lot toward our next paradise of caffeine.

Christina and I thought that we must be in the wrong coffee house when we first walked in the new Cup a Joe because there was no smoke — not a flame, not a flicker, not even a match, nothing! We were stunned and continued to be surprised for the rest of our evening.

The new place is really small, only about half the size of the Hillsborough Street location, and the customers are older (some grad students, some professors, and some regular adults out for a mug of java). This Cup a Joe, which opened in May 1994, is located near the movie theater and beside the Record Exchange. The majority of the music played was provided by the Record Exchange and did not have the typical alternative Cup a Joe flair.

We thought that the new location

catered more to the after movie cup of coffee scene (better for a date because it is so quiet) than the let your hair down and hang loose scene at the other Cup a Joe.

The new Cup a Joe has an artsy flair. The ceiling is arched and lined with track lighting. The floor is a checkerboard of orange and blue. There is a mural on the back wall featuring a jockey riding into the sea, a dog, an elephant, and bikers riding into the foreground. We missed the featured art on the walls that hangs at the old Joe, but when we asked the workers they said they were in transition between showings, and there should be a new one up soon.

We could easily see a family coming here after a movie and being comfortable. The parents could sit around and drink coffee while the children snacked on the popsicles and Mickey Mouse ice cream bars from the freezer by the counter.

For a homey touch, we were relieved to see old movie theater seats and what resembled old Belk Dining Hall chairs. Elvis also joined in this new, fresh (and super clean) atmosphere with his picture signifying the men's room and Marilyn Monroe's picture signifying the women's. There is a gigantic mirror that takes up the entire wall along the counter holding the sugar, cinnamon, honey, and other required coffee house odds and ends. Christina and I hated the mirror because it showed the world the many reasons that we should not have the cheesecake.

We were startled to find Meredith's own Dr. True-Weber's daughter working behind the counter. The only comment she would share was, "I enjoy working here because I meet interesting people."

The only other person working, Joe Hendrick, seemed like a very dedicated Cup a Joe employee. He has been working with the coffee house for a year and a half and said that he works where he is needed (either the

**CUP A JOE**  
see page ten