

Who's your coffee shop?

GENE MILLER

In Victoria there's a café—or cawfee shop—for your every mood.

The email subject line said “Achieve Extra Power With Viagra Pro.” That's right. *Pro*. And all this time I've been using *Viagra Amateur*.

Speaking of stimulus packages, let's talk about coffee. Eager to conflate my pleasures, I've been on a wandering quest locally for not just a very good cup of coffee, but the perfect coffee joint. Along the way, I've made some notes....

Starbucks

People were benighted before there was Starbucks. They wore animal pelts and clubbed each other to death. They thought the world was flat. Teenagers said things like: “Gosh, Suelene, d'yuh think maybe could I take yuh to the church social?” People were complete dorks, aside from hippies; and nobody went “out” for coffee.

Coffee was the beverage in a heavy china mug at diners. Coffee was dissolvable crystals with jar names like Yuban and Nescafe, or the acidulous poison that you decanted from your percolator at home. I will remember as long as I live the morning ritual in my family's home: my father banging the aluminum basket of warm, saturated grounds onto two sheets of day-old newspaper, then folding them on the diagonal for disposal.

I was not a Starbucks “early adopter.” When I visited my first Starbucks (location lost in memory), I remember being overwhelmed by the entire idea of lattes, ventis and “extra shots.” Who had ever heard such nomenclature before, in the “cuppa cawfee” world? It was an intoxicating new environment: the production ritual, the flamboyant, knob-twisting skill of the barista, the cool signage, the youthful energy, the clever, relaxed Ikea-fied décor....and people sitting around tapping on laptops, socializing, cell-phonning, taking and giving meetings—clearly living richer, more purposeful, cooler and happier lives.

Suddenly, a shop had become the community's living room, its office; now life was more intensely cosmopolitan, and home simply the place you slept, showered and copulated. A neighbourhood without a Starbucks was a neighbourhood denied.

But shifting cultural nuance has caught up

to Starbucks: it has descended to “mid-concept” and the name has acquired semeiotic baggage including an eye-roll and a faint whiff of repudiation. You can tell that the employees are only a gyre or two above the surly convenience store slackers taking your Slurpee money. Now, if you're cool, you're not a Starbucks person. Of course, I'm ultra-not a Starbucks person because I'm ultra-cool.

Dutch Bakery

Can you say *konditorei*? Ever since Woodward's flower and grocery store on Fort Street closed, and Eaton's eliminated its basement supermarket (before eliminating itself), Victoria has been going downhill. All that's left is the Dutch Bakery—the sole territory between proper Victoria and the abyss of modernity. This Fort Street institution which, by now, has probably sold its ten millionth vanilla slice (are they getting smaller, or is it my imagination?) is legendary as the lunchtime and afternoon downtown sanctuary of generations of white-gloved little old ladies who are ritually (and, I like to think, protectively) served cottage cheese plates, turkey and lettuce sandwiches, and bowls of soup with cello-wrapped Saltines. May this place and its decorous clientele last forever.

Pure Vanilla

After you work up a sweat playing croquet on some ex-diplomat's lawn, or practically shout yourself hoarse giving directions to the men hauling the antique oak burl breakfront into your Uplands home, or exhaust yourself driving clients all over hell-and-gone looking at waterfront properties, is there anything quite as restorative as a short hop to this Cadboro Bay Road emporium for a raspberry *tartelette* or pear and *crème fraîche croissant*, and a *latte*? Oh, and some bottled water for my Borzoi, please.

Come the revolution, you're all going to be nibbling stale bread, you bastards!

Habit

Years ago, I had a screaming fight with my stepdaughter, Marjie, who as a budding teenager calmly informed me one day that I was “not cool.” Instantly reactive, I told her

I was incredibly cool—possibly the coolest person on the planet. “No you're not,” she said flatly. It just got worse from there.

Habit on lower Pandora Avenue is the place where by your mere presence you make a statement about your own edginess. The minimalist Habit Coffee and Culture is decoratively weird, dislocating, and features a periodical rack of trendy, one-issue wonders with titles like *Paste*, *Hobo*, *Corduroy*, and *Theme*. Skinny black jeans, Japanese black t-shirt, vest and well-worn book bag, please.

Hey, maybe I'm planning the details of my art installation at Open Space; maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm working on my novel; maybe I can't be bothered. Whatever.

Union Pacific

Conveniently located next to a sex boutique on Herald Street (hmm, is that a biscotti or are you just happy to see me?), the friendly and welcoming Union Pacific boasts a Dragon Alley patio which on quiet, sunny, summer weekend mornings is a taste of paradise on Earth. You know: moments when the world holds still and every sight and sound seems etched, numinous, held in an aura or husk of heightened meaning, the silence drenched in sunlight. Damn! I'm tearing up. Pass me a tissue, please.

Paul's

Coffee under the copper top and home of the endless refill. The restaurant is an architectural masterpiece with its booths set around a u-shaped service aisle. The sugar dispensers are never clogged and pour like the horn of plenty. There's a whole plate of those little cream thingies on your table, so you never have to say: “Oh, miss....” The waitresses are perfection. If Heaven were a diner, these would be its waitresses. It's the kind of place where you say: “I'd like two scrambled eggs, moist but not wet, exactly 14 extra-well-done home fries, ham, and an English muffin lots of butter,” and, by God, you get moist but not wet scrambled eggs, numbered potatoes cooked over hellfire, a gigantic, flavourful bone-in slab of ham, and a muffin swimming in butter. What more could you ask for in this shabby, pain-filled life?



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Caffe Fantastico

Setting: ...Caffe Fantastico on Kings just off Quadra, a block south of Hillside.

Mid-afternoon, sunny weekday, August 2008.

Scene: Three customers dotted around the shop, drinks in front of them. Basically drop-dead quiet.

Action: I walk to the L-shaped counter.

Barista, a guy in his 20s, is behind counter, serving no one.

Dialogue: Me: "Dark coffee in a mug, please."

Barista, voice dripping with contempt, points to sign above other leg of the L, four feet away from where I'm standing: "You order over here."

The Parsonage Cafe

Damn good coffee at the Parsonage Cafe, tucked into North Park, off Cook. Lovely people running the place. A humble but homey, comfortable room.

Tim Hortons

How has Tim Horton's managed to successfully promote the myth that every time you purchase some of their mediocre coffee, calorific pastry or glutinous soups, you're actually

tapping into a Canadian tradition? It's a fast food joint, for God's sake, owned by the International Synthetics and Crap Corporation, symbol THI on the NYSE and the TSX. The outlets are designed by the same team that does jails and the Canadian Tire stores. There are something like 3,500 outlets in Canada and the US. How warm and fuzzy and traditionally Canadian, with the long, slowly advancing line-up of lumpen hockey dads, T-shirt-wearing automotive supply delivery girls, tile installers driving four-by-fours....

What? Oh sorry...uh, a large double-double to go and a couple of honey crullers, please.

Cornerstone Café

A place that feels so right, it's almost enough to make me move back to Fernwood. An attractive, high-ceilinged room at the corner of Fernwood and Gladstone, Cornerstone's big draw for me is that it feels neighbourly but not cliquy. Shame they haven't filled the walls with fabulous large-format photos of various theatre productions at the Belfry across the street. Good that I'm not in charge. I'd ruin everything.

Demitasse

"Excuse me, I wonder if you could turn the music down."

"What did you say?"

"I wonder if you could turn the music down."

"I can't hear you."

"Could you turn the music down?"

"You have to speak up."

"COULD YOU TURN DOWN THE MUSIC?"

"What kind of muffin?"

"No, the music. Could you turn it down?"

"I did turn it down."

"What? I can't hear you."

The author attests that no baristas were injured or killed in the preparation of this column.



Gene Miller is the founder of Open Space Arts Centre, *Monday Magazine*, and the Gaining Ground Sustainable Urban Development Summit.

PROGRAMS IN EARTH LITERACIES

May 5, 12, 26

Coming Home, An Ecofeminist Way
7-9pm, \$60.

May 16

Mother I Hear Your Cry

Healing our mother line. 9am-5pm, \$60.

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August 8

**Heart of the Cosmos:
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With renowned cosmologist
Dr. Brian Swimme, PhD.

9:30am-5pm, \$95 before June 1, \$105 after.



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