

Coffee as Culture  
By Tamara Palmer

“Grande pumpkin spice latte! Tall, non-fat, no-whip peppermint mocha! Tall, no-room Americano!” the voice of the barista drones on throughout the packed café. Does no one order regular coffee anymore, I wonder, as I look around at the faces that would have never adorned a café twenty years prior. I venture myself to be a pure bohemian, though, one who drank cappuccinos as far back as 1984, at the age of twelve, in Chicago. Even then, I knew I belonged in Europe.

In Europe, everyone drinks espresso - espresso with water or espresso straight up. What do they think of us sugaring up and creaming down our caffeine beverages, until only a hint of coffee flavoring remains? We, in America, like our coffee to taste like dessert.

I treasure fond memories of eating spoonfuls of coffee ice cream on my father’s lap before bed, back when I was quite young - maybe five. I came into this world craving a cup o’ joe. The comforting beverage warms the back of my throat, before falling down my esophagus and splashing into my belly. Anticipation of the soon-to-come, steady buzz of energy fills my being. It will help me recreate the document that crashed on my computer last night. It will stay with me until my next meal, when I can justify my next cup.

“Caramel macchiato!” What the hell is a macchiato? It’s the Americanized marketing version of a coffee beverage. I don’t think it’s real. What’s the ratio of sugar to cream to caffeine in that one?

“Venti pumpkin spice latte.” I want to order a venti because I like the sound of it on my tongue. I imagine myself Italian, intellectual and well affected. I love the word “affected”. I’m in a Fellini movie, waiting for Marcello Mastroianni to glide into the café and sweep me off my feet. I want to throw my neck back and stick out my tush and cry, “Marchello,” as I flip my not-long-enough hair through my arms and pretend I’m the busty blonde in *La Dolce Vita*.

But I order a tall, because I’m scared of the extra caffeine. I don’t like the feeling of my heart on a freight train, blowing down the tracks, careening down the mountain, without a way to brake. I picture Casey Jones, “drivin’ that train, high on cocaine,” out of control. I like control. I try to make “tall” sound exotic, like grande or venti. Can they not find a sexier word to use? I’m drowning in over-the-top marketing, and I’m stuck drinking a tall. How many people order grandes because they’re too embarrassed to say “tall” (which, ironically enough, stands for “small” in the world of American coffee chains.) Par for the course, I suppose. Heaven forbid we actually order anything small - that we actually want a portion size that’s appropriate to consume in one sitting.

“Personal decaf grande soy peppermint mocha!” WAH? I look up to the counter and see a woman pick up her own coffee-on-the-go mug, now brimming with mocha goodness. Ummm, mocha goodness. I should have ordered a peppermint mocha. Dessert for breakfast....

“Grande soy latte.” Honkin’ huge soy latte. No, that would be venti. I close my eyes and I’m in Paris, sitting....

“Passion tea?” My eyes shoot open. Someone didn’t order coffee? Wait, there’s a tea with passion in the title? Is that legal before noon? Does one feel more passionate after drinking passion tea? Can one feel passionate in an American coffee shop, though?

So, anyway, back to Paris. I’m sitting at an outdoor patio of a café, watching tour barges drift along the Seine. From where I sit, I can see Le Pont Saint Michel with the large N’s for Napoleon. It’s my favorite. I love the concept of people having favorite bridges in Paris. I could never love the Alexander III, with its glittering gold. My first time in the city, I felt particularly bold and impassioned, as I shot the famous glittering bridge in black and white. I’m such the rebel.

The air is cool, and the leaves are nearly off the trees in the Paris in my mind. Perhaps it’s mid November and the sky is gunmetal grey. I’m there with a journal, jotting down notes, feelings, observations, but not doing a terrifically good job, as I can’t seem to stop watching the flow of people in and out of the cafe. I try to imagine what they’re wearing, but I look up to find a man with a shaved head, Notre Dame letter jacket, jeans, and white sneakers standing before me. I’m NOT in Paris. I’m in a Starbucks, beside a gas station, in a strip mall in the middle of America. If you could take me and transport me to Paris, I would look less out of place than I do here, typing into my laptop.

“Forty degree, decaf, light foam grande latte!” I sigh in the absurdity of our America and look at my watch. It’s time to go to work.