

A large black coffee pot is the central focus, sitting on a white cylindrical pedestal. The pot is filled with dark coffee. The background is a solid yellow color. At the bottom of the image, several people are shown from behind, kneeling or standing with their hands raised towards the pedestal, as if in a state of awe or devotion. The overall composition is surreal and symbolic.

# Bean there, done that

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BY JIM CHASTAIN AND NATHAN BROWN

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Americans love a good cup of coffee. We drink our mochas, espressos and lattes by the gallons. Indeed, the latest statistics indicate that 80 percent of Americans drink coffee, and more than half of the population drinks it every day.

It's probably safe to say, then, that coffee is our most popular addiction. After all, it's fashionable to say "I can't make it through the morning without my coffee." But you don't hear many people bragging about that fourth Coke of the day.

Of course, whenever Americans become addicted to something — especially something legal like hamburgers, oil or reality TV — you'll find corporate America lurking nearby, waiting to pounce. And coffee's no different. Not too many years back, a certain corporation made the brilliant discovery that there was some serious cash to be made by selling Americans a certain delicious brown drink they simply can't get enough of. Add tasty treats, trendy trinkets and pop CDs, and you have yourself a franchise.

Thanks in large part to this franchising mind-set, coffee is now a \$70 billion a year industry. Corporate coffee shops are popping up on every corner, at least in the best neighborhoods. And for those who want to grab a cup of coffee on the way to work, that's probably just fine.

But corporate coffee shops aren't for everyone. They're often noisy and crowded. They have that "get 'em in, get 'em out" mentality. And because they tend to be carbon copies of each other, they're usually not all that interesting.

With corporate coffee shops, you know what you're getting. Consistent quality, handy locations and no surprises.

However, if you love coffee but are also addicted to the ideals of individuality and creativity, you may have to look elsewhere. Some place that celebrates the independent spirit. Somewhere a bit off the beaten path. Some hang out-friendly place like those European coffeehouses of old where artists, writers and bohemians gathered to sip, write and discuss.

This article celebrates Central Oklahoma's "counter culture," those great coffeehouses you sometimes find that offer something other than the "same old, same old." Our goal? To point out some of the little guys who do coffee the right way and who deserve your support.

And so, for several months, we've been visiting these coffee nooks and crannies, sipping their coffee, talking to their staff and checking out what it is they do.

What makes a great coffeehouse?

This is debatable, of course, but generally we look for one-of-a-kind places that don't smell, even remotely, of a franchise. In other words, places that make communities more distinctive and less carbon-copy conventional. Independent coffeehouses tend to come and go, so it says a lot about a place if it's been around for awhile.

Other than this, we looked for a certain laid-backness that runs against the grain of our crazy-paced, get-it-done world. We've broken our somewhat subjective criteria down into five categories that will help explain what we're talking about.

The vibe

Any sense of the eclectic is a nice start. This can range from "fun" to "funky" in terms of the decor, furniture and staff attitude. But mainly, we're looking to see if the business embraces an independent spirit and is really trying to do its own thing. One of the ways this becomes evident is in the diversity of the people who feel comfortable showing up. And once there, does this place encourage them to hang out? Is it a spot where everybody could know your name if you dropped in enough?

For the right vibe, good hours are crucial. We need these places to be there for us. Another factor is whether or not they're art friendly — that is, what's hangin' on the walls, playin' on the speakers and happenin' on the weekends. And finally, a "make or break" issue: cool music played at a decent volume. There are few things worse than bad music playing on blown speakers at a volume that makes you want to scream at the person next to you.

The tastes

Obviously, the key to this whole exercise is whether or not the coffee works. The places can have all the bells and whistles, but if the coffee sucks, forget it. Variety matters, of course. Sometimes we need something different than the coffee of the day. Also, do they offer decaf for the overly nervous or "caffeinatedly" strung out types and low-fat milk for the health nuts? And what do they serve their drinks in? Cool mugs count for a lot.

For most folks, there also needs to be something sweet to eat along with their drink. Do they offer breakfast or lunch? If so, do they make it themselves or heat it in a microwave? And we give out bonus points whenever we find chocolate espresso beans waiting.

The people

Nothing drives us away more quickly than staff members who are bored, cold or sometimes even "put out" by waiting on us. We're not asking for much. Just some hot

baristas to pretend they like us while we're placing our order. We call this "counter intelligence." Can the people behind the counter carry on an interesting conversation? Are they snobbish or in a constant state of panic?

Also, does the owner have an interesting story? And as we've mentioned, so much can be determined by the clientele. Are they artist or writer types? Or are they sorority girls and a bunch of suits in a hurry?

### The building

Overall, one thing we look for is whether a place is a bit bohemian, or at least tastefully bourgeois. A stand-alone site is a wonderful thing, while strip malls are cultural pariahs that should be outlawed. (Yes, we've been to one or two coffee shops that have somehow pulled off the right atmosphere in a strip mall, but it's a rarity, in our experience.) We also look for wood, brass and glass. An overabundance of plastic, metal and Styrofoam can quickly take the edge off of a good space.

For general hang out-ability, tables and chairs are critical. And the more a place steers clear of matchy-matchy-poo-poo, the better. Also, how's the view out the windows? This is important for anyone looking for a break from work, traffic or an angry significant other.

If there's a second floor involved, with good, quiet seating, that's pure heaven. Nice bathrooms, considering what coffee does to our systems, are also helpful. And parking plays a role in whether or not we're going to drive all the way over, dragging books, journals and laptops. And, speaking of laptops, these days having Wi-Fi and outlets to plug into are indispensable.

### Automatic deductions

Nothing personal, but we can't take a place with an agenda. Not to get specific, but if we hear a certain style of music, or the name suggests some sort of exclusive club, we're not interested. Another turnoff is televisions, especially televisions blaring soap operas or Fox News. Bad coffee means a bad experience. And, finally, we'll mention one more time: If the service is rude, forget it. We'll slip our money back in our wallets and leave while our drinks are being made.



Southwest of the metro, the Crazy 8 Café is a popular lunchtime spot in Chickasha.

## Top 10

Using this criteria, we've listed Central Oklahoma's top 10 independent coffeehouses in numerical order. These are establishments we've visited often and grown to love. Because of space, we won't mention how they scored on each of the traits. Suffice it to say that if we've included them, they're scoring pretty well on most fronts.

### 1. The Red Cup

(3122 N. Classen, Oklahoma City )

The Red Cup is the closest thing we've found to the über-coffeehouse: the Spider House in Austin, Texas. In an old house, hidden back just a bit off of Classen, The Red Cup oozes everything we look for when it's hang out time. Wood floors, mismatched chairs and tables, little nooks and crannies, bookshelves — eclectic all around. The coffee and specialty drinks are wonderful. And although we're nonpracticing vegetarians, this is some of our favorite vegetarian fare in town. Definitely on the bohemian side of the fence, you'll still see city councilmen and lawyers sitting next to struggling artists and Oklahoma City University students. The counter intelligence are free spirits and among our favorites in town. Free Wi-Fi and a few outlets. Great music (be prepared to hear Tom Waits now and then). The lunch hour is crowded, so be careful about hanging out when people are looking for tables.

### 2. The Third Place

(305 S. Washington, Stillwater )

Coffeehouses don't get more hip than this. Located on the "strip" in Stillwater , The Third Place has everything it takes to separate the great coffeehouses from the good ones. The coffee and treats are wonderful, and the staff is fun. Inside, the place reeks of cool. Brick floors, wood paneling, comfy chairs, split-level, nooks and crannies with couches, sofas and awesome tables. With soft colors, lighting and interesting art, Third Place gives off a great bohemian vibe. Plus, it has unbelievable hours, staying open until 1 a.m. most nights. Third Place , which is supposedly based on the idea that it's the "third place" to find community outside of home and work, fulfills its mission by being an exceptional hangout.

### 3. Aspen Coffee Co.

(111 W. Seventh, Stillwater )

It's unfair that two of Central Oklahoma's best coffeehouses are in Stillwater , about a mile apart from each other, but hey, we call 'em like we see 'em. Like Eskimo Joe's, Aspen Coffee Co. has become a staple in Stillwater , serving great coffee and out-of-this-world munchies for a decade. Aspen has two locations in town, but we prefer the bohemian downtown version to the more bourgeois location on S. Western Road . We love the counter intelligence at Aspen — friendly folks who will chat with you. Located in a cool building, the business has great counters, tables and brick, along with good music and art. Except for the acoustics and for the fact that it's a little more cramped, Aspen is in a virtual dead heat with Third Place .

### 4. Uncommon Grounds

(100 E. Main, Bricktown; Oklahoma City )

This is a refreshing hideaway in Bricktown. It's a bit small. Not a huge number of tables. But it's cozy. And it's one of the few places in the area where one can breathe. When the weather's nice, the tables out front on the wooden deck are quite functional. Good sandwiches, soups and fabulous desserts. And it has a candy machine and big glass jar, both filled with chocolate-covered espresso beans! The counter intelligence have always been easy to get along with. Free Wi-Fi. And the hours (until 10 p.m. on weekdays and midnight on weekends) are the best we've found in the metro area for the late-night "caffaholics." Uncommon Grounds has been here a while, too. It was Bricktown when Bricktown wasn't cool.

### 5. Java Joint

(3906 N. Donald, Bethany )

Java Joint, located near Southern Nazarene University in Bethany , is one of those amazing places that pops up in little communities and surprises you. Family owned, Java Joint is located in the type of stand-alone building we love. The business has plenty of seating, great hours and some wonderful nooks for sipping, reading or writing. In

addition to the coffee drinks, including its specialty Mexican coffee, Java Joint has an impressive food menu, making it both restaurant and coffeehouse. Still, Java Joint gives off the right coffeehouse vibe with its fireplace, Wi-Fi, bar area, leather sofa and art. When you're in Bethany , Java Joint is a must.

## 6. Crazy 8 Café

(415 W. Chickasha , Chickasha )

Wow! We love it when smaller towns nail it. And Crazy 8 Café is a pleasant surprise in downtown Chickasha . When you walk in, it will feel like you're going into an antique shop. But keep going all the way to the back and you'll strike gold. Great coffee and lattes, and some of the best dadgum baked goods and sweets we found anywhere. Plus, if you want some real food, breakfast or lunch, Crazy 8's got you covered. The real attraction, though, is "room to spread out." A second floor balcony-like area gives this place more space than anywhere else. An abundance of wooden tables. Nice comfy chairs. Great lighting. And the counter intelligence are as friendly as they can be. Crazy 8 hasn't been here as long as some of the others, but we're pulling for it. If you need to get away from the city, this place is worth the drive.

## 7. Winans Fine Chocolates and Coffee

(207 E. Main, Norman )

Norman has frustrated us for years when it comes to coffeehouses. We had it for a while with the Opolis, but, alas, we lost the coffeehouse. Winans Fine Chocolates and Coffee, a fairly new establishment, gives us reason to hope again. The owners have done a great job with this downtown slot. Deep shades of paint on the walls supply a great backdrop for local artists. The coffee is excellent. And if you want some chocolate to go with it, this is your place. Enough great chocolate here to send you into a sugar coma. Free Wi-Fi. Really nice, clean bathrooms. Parking is a little rough, but if you don't mind a short walk, you can park at the railroad tracks and stay awhile. The music never disappoints. Winans has brave hours and stays open to 10 p.m. on weeknights for the students. And the students have caught on.

## 8. Julie's Juice n Java

( 1769 Garth Brooks Blvd. , Yukon )

Julie, the proprietor of Julie's Juice n Java, gets it. She understands the coffeehouse concept of making a great place for coffee lovers and artists to come and hang out. But now, she's doing the difficult work of passing that idea on to others. After initial attempts in Norman and Mustang, she's set up shop on the wild coffee frontier of Yukon , where a good mug of coffee typically means a 50 cent cup of Folgers. Julie's hard work is impressive, and Julie's Juice n Java has a lot going for it. Great coffee and munchies (try the smoked chicken wrap). Nice wood tables and furniture. Cool art and decor. Dark,

soothing colors. Wi-Fi. And background music at the right level. Although the drive-through is her bread and butter, Julie hopes more people will begin to see her business as a place to drop by and stick around for a while. We do, too!

#### 9. Will's Coffee Shop

(4322 N. Western, Oklahoma City )

Will's Coffee Shop is in the foyer of the Will Rogers Theater on Western Avenue . It's a unique and fun location. The proprietors expanded the seating and made this a great spot. It's on the tastefully bourgeois side of the scale, so the look inside is trendy and hip. The booths along the wall are terrific and have accessible outlets. Free Wi-Fi. Nice lattes, specialty drinks and coffee, and some good grilled panini sandwiches, among other things. Members of the clientele are eclectic and laid-back. Makes for a nice atmosphere. There's plenty of parking in the back, which is nice. We could do without the big TV, but were genuinely impressed that the current owner is actually related to Will Rogers.

#### 10. D.G.'s Coffee

(301 S. Division, Guthrie)

While there are several other places in the metro that could have made our list, we've saved the last spot for D.G.'s Coffee in Guthrie, thanks in large part to its fierce "independent spirit." Co-owners Steve and Shelby Lewis were living in the San Francisco Bay area when they decided to pack bags and follow their dream. They wanted to find a small town where they could open up a little coffeehouse, raise their kids and allow Shelby some time to pursue her writing. (She's published eight novels.) D.G.'s Coffee in Guthrie was the result. It's in one of those great stand-alone buildings we love, and it has some wonderful food to go with the coffee. While it is perhaps becoming more of a diner than a true coffeehouse, this is typical for these small-town family-owned businesses. They do what it takes to make a go of it.

#### Honorable mentions

Some places didn't quite fit the concept of an independent coffeehouse. Our favorite, by far, is Java Joe's Coffee Bar in Full Circle Bookstore ( 50 Penn Place in Oklahoma City ), which would have ranked high on our list if we'd felt comfortable including it. It's not a strict coffeehouse; it's a great bookstore with an upscale coffee shop in it. But no place better embraces the idea of the independent spirit than Full Circle, Oklahoma 's largest independent, locally owned bookstore. If you aren't going there regularly to buy your books and coffee, shame on you!

Finally, we have Java Dave's, located throughout the metro, state and country. Java Dave's purports to embrace the independent coffeehouse concept by allowing franchisees some amount of freedom to be who they want to be. So, to honor that idea, we'll simply state that we like the location on N.E. 10th Street in Oklahoma City just fine.