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THE NEW FILLMORE

SAN FRANCISCO ■ MAY 2009



Like its mural of musical greats, the c

Brother, can you spare *a* latte?

INSIDE FILLMORE'S CAFE CULTURE

- Traffic in the coffeehouses is booming, but not sales
- Coffee shop etiquette, plus security and tech tips
- A tour of local java joints: the 'Mo to Pacific Heights

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WITH NEARLY 10 percent of the city's workforce pink-slipped, the crowds in the neighborhood's coffee shops have surged, and they're staying longer. But now the sitting and sipping experience is all about job searches, networking and free WiFi. If you're one of the poor, huddled masses without a home office and a fast internet connection, you need a place to roost with affordable online access and an atmosphere to motivate, incubate and concentrate. To explore the vibe, the clientele, the prices and the workplace amenities, we perambulated and caffeinated among the newcomers and old-timers at coffee shops in the neighborhood. Our findings begin on page 7.

KATHRYN AMNOTT



Office Space: Barista Included

What you need to know about setting up shop in a cafe

By Cheryl Lurie | Photographs by Kathryn Amnott
With Mark Anthony O'Neill, Contributing Researcher

ONE THING IS CLEAR: The rules have changed as more and more office-spacers descend upon the cafe culture. Before you snap up your laptop and head out to set up camp at one of the neighborhood's many coffee shops, consider this report from the front.

ETIQUETTE: Cell phone calls are now accepted behavior inside most coffee houses, if done in reasonable tones and for a short duration. But remember that your neighbors can hear you — and not many want a dose of diverticulitis with their danish and double macchiatto. If you have to shout above the din, take it outside.

Wear ear buds if you plan to listen to audio on a laptop. No one wants to hear the *Wonderful World of Uvulas* while sipping a caramel latte.

And if you're sick, stay home. One advantage of being laid off is that you don't have to prove to your boss that you're a trouper.

Finally, be respectful of your host. Don't bring in food or beverages from outside sources to fuel your work.

TECH TIPS: Since access is not always obvious, first ask the barista how to get WiFi. Each cafe has different

protocols, codes at the register or designated networks with the cafe name. Most laptops can automatically detect the nearest unsecured WiFi networks, but you may need to refresh your browser or reboot in a coffee shop.

When it comes to electrical outlets, some cafes have only a few strategically placed outlets. Survey the area or inquire politely if it starts to turn into a scavenger hunt. Don't lift up people's pants-legs in your search. Most folks are happy to plug you into an empty outlet.

SECURITY: It is never a good idea to leave laptops and handheld devices unattended, even in neighborly digs. Theft is not the only concern; documents or passwords can be compromised or accessed while you are indisposed. Bring a laptop lockdown device to at least deter the grab-and-go possibility.

As with cell phones, remember that public places are ripe with eavesdroppers and roving eyes. A laptop privacy screen is a good idea when working on sensitive or private documents. Shut down or log out before stepping out. Public WiFi is unsecured — that means that anyone can have access to your online information.

THE BARISTA BAROMETER

Traffic, If Not Sales, Booming at Local Cafes

HOW HAS the economic downturn affected business in local coffee shops? According to several general managers of the neighborhood's mocha meccas, sales may not have increased dramatically, but the customer base has. More people now have the freedom to hang out on the street, even if they don't necessarily have a lot of money to spend.

Kay-C Hayden, manager of the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, says that since her corporate bosses installed free WiFi six months ago, the cafe is filled with more people for longer periods. Some patrons — "squatters" — buy a coffee and camp out for hours. But sometimes those who work or study there for hours start with coffee and end up buying food items throughout the day, which translates into more purchases overall than from the usual foot traffic.

There has also been a shift in what customers buy. Instead of fancy lattes or cappuccinos, they more often buy a regular cup of coffee or a bag of beans to brew at home. "The same \$10 goes to a few regular cups of coffee," Hayden says. "So the financial backing is there. It just goes toward less luxurious items."

Peet's manager, Milette Obach Duque, has worked in the store for seven years. She sees more faces these days.

"Customers are here not only to work, or for the free WiFi, but to socialize," she says, noting that sales have remained steady. "Right after the holidays, we were the only Peet's out of 300 stores around the country that scored 100 percent on performance, customers and budget," she says. "People feel welcome here, and go out of their way to come here."

Down in the jazz district, Fillmore Street Cafe manager Munir Adem says he noticed that more people began showing up after the shift to free WiFi, but that sales went down. There has also been increase in the number of workers who stop by from new businesses in the area.

"Yoshi's and 1300's employees come here for the food — maybe because it's cheaper — for their break-times," Adem says. "And Bruno's folks come for the coffee in the morning before they open."



Fillmore Street Cafe

1301 Fillmore Street (at Eddy)

In the old What a Grind digs, with free WiFi, generous tables and the cheapest cuppa joe (\$1.25) on the street, this joint is a hidden treasure. Breakfast specials handwritten on the chalkboard keep the Yelp crowd coming back for “perfectly toasted” bagels and egg sandwiches, all 5 to 6 bucks.

Singularly owned and operated, this multi-culti neighborhood cafe is run by three former patrons who remember regulars’ drink orders from way back and play laid-back Bob Marley throughout the day. The crowd, like the mural of musical greats, is eclectic: graphic-novel artists, musicians, parolees, Fillmore Center residents and staffers from Yoshi’s and other nearby new businesses.

The electrical outlets are a bit rough and unhinged, like some of the crowd, but manager Munir Adem keeps a protective eye on his patrons. “We see these folks everyday. If someone forgets their wallet, we help them out,” says Adem. “We don’t let anyone get uncomfortable or bothered here.”

The frills are in the coffee and the breakfast sandwiches, not in the decor, but the prices can’t be beat. Watch for the outdoor patio opening soon — that may help the masses discover this gem.



The Grove

2016 Fillmore Street (near Pine)

Loud and busy from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., there’s no doubt the Grove is one of the most popular places on the street to meet, greet and eat. But it is one of the few cafes without free WiFi — access costs \$6 a day.

Still, if you need a bit of homey, fishing lodge ambiance and a hearty snack in a lively atmosphere, this is the place. Equipped with ample plug-in strips hidden behind wall ledges and under the table near the fireplace, the Grove allows you to move around. As a bonus, it has one of the most artistic one-seater restrooms on the block, with painted walls and tiles and natural light from the alley window.

Once your ears get accustomed to the roar of the convection fan, you may even hear strains of Springsteen mourning another Monday or Rod Stewart gargling glass. Sip a mocha in an oversized cup from the friendly, foam-artistic baristas.

Break open the piggy-bank, though. The Grove has the highest pay-to-play cost: coffee is \$2.10 and refills are \$1. And the food police are very strict: Management actually showed a sign that said “no outside food or beverage” to a couple with coffee in tow who were waiting to pick up a to-go order.



Royal Ground

2060 Fillmore Street (at California)

The tech-friendly Royal Ground is a bright, low-key neighborhood place with lots of room, big tables, varied edibles and free WiFi. Most of the patrons are regulars, young professionals and dental students, with the occasional eco-couple wearing matching ponytails and sustainable outfits. A regular drip is \$1.50, refills \$1.

The Royal's throne room is more of a trip to the dungeon. Wedged back past bags of coffee beans, the tiny loo has precarious steps and wind chimes that dangle a warning about the low ceiling. If you scattered enough breadcrumbs to find your way back, you may encounter the effusive cookie man and sandwichmaker in his natural habitat. He's a part-time, semi-retired counterman who works to get out of the house.

A bonus for multi-taskers: The adjoining door to the laundromat allows you to monitor your sudsing duds without hearing the machines. But beware of the continuously piped mellow rock. Three hours of Mariah Carey and Lionel Richie can drive you to decaf.

Peet's Coffee & Tea

2197 Fillmore Street (at Sacramento)

Peet's, at the apex of Fillmore at Sacramento, is the boisterous, gregariously social sister among neighborhood java houses. The elbow-to-elbow seating really packs 'em in, so much so that manager Milette Obach Duque replaced one pew-style bench with chairs to make folks feel more comfortable seated hip-to-hip. Tabletops are small and outlets sparse, yet by 8:30 every morning, the espresso machines are barely audible over the clickety-clack of laptop keys.

Later in the day, the Society of Distinguished Gentlemen holds court on all things literary, while a trough of toddlers boosts the decibels and the quotient of Cheerio confetti. By the time the yoganistas glide into the fray after setting their intentions for the day, your two-hour window for free WiFi will have timed out.

You'll need to visit the register for another code and another cup of \$1.70 joe — no break on the refill. Just keep smiling. You never know when you'll be captured on camera and become the shop's next customer of the week.



Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf

2201 Fillmore Street (at Sacramento)

With free WiFi, plenty of outlets — look up — leather chairs and windows looking out onto the crossroads of the neighborhood, the Coffee Bean is one of the most office space-ious cafes in the 'hood. The ambient chill music, laptop-friendly tables and studious crowd allows for the maximum concentration-incubation-motivation environment.

If the suburban surroundings start to induce brain freeze, move outside. The Bean has the street's best south-side seats in the sunshine.

With coffee at \$1.70 and a free refill, you could polish that resume and then stick around to watch the characters who show up later in the day with their dogs. Bearded, fedora-ed and spritely, resident historian Kelly Johnson has been a Fillmore fixture since 1969 and can usually be found out front chewing the fat with the regulars.



Starbucks

2222 Fillmore Street (near Sacramento)
1501 Fillmore Street (at O’Farrell)

The ubiquitous Starbucks imposes a corporate uniformity on its franchises: Both locations on Fillmore — plus one around the corner at Mollie Stone’s and another at Divisadero and Bush — have consistent prices, decor, signage and soundtracks — and fees for Wi-Fi access to the tune of \$3.99 for a two-hour connection. (Free access is only for AT&T high speed or U-Verse customers, but the service is so slow it’s hardly better than dial-up.)

The upper Fillmore location sports a fraternity of students, squatters on laptops and cover-to-cover news-jockeys as homogenous as the decor. The O’Farrell crowd moves along; there are no laptop loiterers here.

The prices may be fixed (\$1.55 for a regular, 50 cents for a refill), but the barista-tudes are not. The crew members in the jazz district may not have dramatic foam-flair, but they work hard and play off the neighborhood regulars with casual aplomb. The upper Fillmore contingent seems disengaged and unconcerned, even when replacing a customer’s coffee cleared by mistake.



Tully’s

2455 Fillmore Street (at Jackson)

At the top of Fillmore stands the lone Tully’s. With few inside tables and outlets, Tully’s is more equipped for a hit-and-run than a day of work. It’s often bubbling with chatter from people who come in waves from nearby schools, churches and businesses. By 8:45 most mornings, the high-powered buggy brigades get their charges ready for drop-off at the preschool across the street. Tweens line up for their first legal habit. Teachers gear up with double-shot, no foam, soymilk lattes. The cafe fills with lively repartee as parents, nannies and neighbors converge.

One drawback: no restroom. But Tully’s has an arrangement with Pets Unlimited, one block south at Washington Street. Potential danger: cute kitten and puppy photos may lead to immediate adoption.

Not many folks roost here for long periods of time or come for serious work, but the baristas make it feel like the caffeinated version of Cheers. Just picture Norm toddling down the block to see a man about a horse.

Martha & Bros.

2800 California Street (at Divisidero)

Martha & Bros.’ Pacific Heights location is a few blocks from Fillmore, but it’s been a neighborhood fixture for almost 20 years. The dark, cozy decor and the cushy red couch make it worth the four-block detour.

WiFi is free, the basic cup is \$1.50 and the baristas are a friendly, family affair. Originally from Matagalpa, Nicaragua, Martha and her brothers learned the coffee trade from their uncle’s coffee plantation and opened their first location in Noe Valley in 1987.

Sweet alternatives for free WiFi

BITTERSWEET CAFE 2123 Fillmore Street, near Sacramento. Free WiFi with sparse outlets (extension cords up front, some in back room). The best seats are the two window benches, but there are no outlets. A small space upstairs is good for meetings or for working away from the crowd, but it’s a bit dark. The good news: You are surrounded by chocolate. The bad news: You are surrounded by chocolate.

TANGO GELATO 2015 Fillmore Street, near Pine. Free WiFi, but there’s only one plug, located near the gelato case. If you don’t need power, outside tables are the best, especially on sunny days. Great panini with free gelato.