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## Common Grounds



New Orleans houses the world's largest bulk handling plant for coffee. It's been a fact since 1993. And while we're still third behind New York and San Francisco on coffee importing and exporting, we can package and transport more beans than anyone on the planet, thanks to Massimo Pacorini of Trieste, Italy who built the Silocaf plant on Tchoupitoulas at the foot of Napoleon Avenue.

Although we've have robusta coffee shops such as Café du Monde and Morning Call since 1862 and 1870 respectively, gourmet arabica beans were the purview of Phyllis Jordan's PJ's only more recently—since 1978. Then, along came Rue de la Course in 1990 and Community Coffee's CC's in 1995, the latter of which added a little more professional—albeit conservative—twist on our local coffeehouse scene.

But why this love affair with \$3 cups of coffee? Even NOPD patrols long ago made the move from Community and Luzianne to Ethiopian Harrar and Jamaican Blue Mountain for their morning elixir. As many as 13 percent

of all Americans now choose to drink espresso-based drinks daily, according to a recent survey by the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

But just as the French Quarter, Marigny, and Bywater house the more creative and esoteric sorts in our community, New Orleans has always had its more bohemian coffeehouse counterparts. Borsodi's and Penny Post (now the Neutral Ground) found success with the purists since the mid-1970s, and this paved the way for unbridled experimentation with a new "beat generation."

On the unseasonably warm November 5th evening, traffic squeezes by in both lanes of Oak Street because of the unusually large number of cars parked on both shoulders. This particular evening in Riverbend is congested with pedestrian traffic as well, hovering around the 8210 address. On the sidewalk a couple of skateboarders chill, a goth sits with a puppy in her lap, another girl plays a violin.

This night in the turn-of-the-19th-century New Orleans borough belongs to Z'OTZ—a mix of art, coffee, and computers by Chesley Allen and Mack Henson. A détente of cultures mix with dialogue between girls in parochial school uniforms and those with ring- and stud-pierced faces. Makeup converses with tattoos, chinos chat with chains.

At around 7 p.m., an organist runs a scale on her keyboard in the front room while a DJ scratches vinyl in the rear garage. As this musical warm-up continues, attendees at this grand opening party sip Fair Trade coffee, drink bubble tea with coconut strings, draw Yerba Mate from gourds through bombillas, and crunch organic cereal with rice milk.

Surrounding the keyboardist are earthen-stained plaster walls resembling an archeological dig and containing embedded specimens such as a vertebrae here and an animal skull there. Another musician sits against the wall, between a protruding nautilus and a stone, both of which lie below a butterfly collection and a living ant farm—all in the cyber café section where computers line one wall.

What was the motivation for yet another coffeehouse? Henson doesn't see Z'OTZ as yet another anything. "Too many coffeehouses are just places to buy coffee; this is a true coffeehouse environment where artistic expression is encouraged," he explains.

So what makes Z'OTZ, or any coffeehouse, any different in a town that sports 53 stores from the four primary chains—PJ's, CC's, Rue de la Course, and Starbucks? It's anybody's guess, but individual ambience and location can help. Danny Hebert, general manager of CC's coffeehouse division, says the New Orleans market is very competitive, making it difficult to keep customers loyal when so many buying decisions are determined strictly by location. Jerry Roppolo of Rue de la Course agrees that location is key. He admits that he can't compete with the big guys to get the market share of New Orleans, so his demographics focus on a smaller circle and he puts his stores where he is going to get market share in a certain area.

And Z'OTZ is no different, targeting its own market share as "a nerve center for self expression," as Henson puts it. Journey up a few steps to a reading room and a cabal is assembled amongst hand-cut paper prints made by a local

artist from such transcendent materials as divorce papers. A third room sustains hooka-smoking groups on long benches with equally long linear tables lining two walls.

A fourth area, while taking on the ambience of a garage, is used by the DJ as a performance space/dance area. Retreat around a corner wall and the cement floor dissolves into a thick carpet of gravel, transitioning the space from carport to Zen garden. Here, more solitary guests unwind near a fountain that flows into shadows of tranquility.

Allen's barista techniques of brewing, frothing, and serving might have been honed in Florence, Italy, but he's eager to have it known, as he leans forward, spreading his arms in a gesture meant to include all the tangible and not so tangible points of the space, that "I learned some finer points while studying the tea ceremony in Kyoto, Japan."

—*Gary Michael Smith*