



michelle galindo

coffee time

contemporary cafés



BRAUN

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常州大学图书馆
藏书章

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographical data are available on the internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

ISBN 978-3-03768-105-3
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www.braun-publishing.ch

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1st edition 2012

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Chris van Uffelen
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Content

- 007 Preface
- 018 6T7 Espai Café
Girona, Spain
- 022 220 Grad
Salzburg, Austria
- 026 Aroma Espresso Bar
New York, USA
- 030 Arthouse Café
Hangzhou, China
- 034 Bea's of Bloomsbury at
One New Change
London, United Kingdom
- 036 Breeze Café
Las Vegas, USA
- 038 Café Angelikahöhe
Schwarzenberg, Austria
- 042 Café Coutume
Paris, France
- 046 Café del Arco
Murcia, Spain
- 052 Café Foam
Stockholm, Sweden
- 058 Café Liberty
London, United Kingdom
- 060 Café Sonja/temporary café
Vienna, Austria
- 064 Café Trussardi
Milan, Italy
- 066 Cafeteria Rog
Ljubljana, Slovenia
- 070 Cielito Querido Café
Mexico City, Mexico
- 074 Dekko Café
New York, USA
- 076 D'Espresso
New York, USA
- 078 Detour Espresso Bar
Darlinghurst, Australia
- 080 Di Più
Vienna, Austria
- 082 Dishoom
London, United Kingdom
- 086 El Portillo
Teruel, Spain
- 090 Everyday Chaa
Seoul, South Korea
- 096 Federal Café
Barcelona, Spain
- 100 Fonte Cafe and Wine Bar
Seattle, USA
- 104 Frans Hals Museum Café
Haarlem, The Netherlands

- 108 **Grand Cafe Usine**
Eindhoven, The Netherlands
- 112 **Intelligentsia Coffee**
Venice, USA
- 116 **Ismo**
Agrinio, Greece
- 118 **Kith Café**
Singapore
- 120 **Koeppe Jemp**
Hoscheid-Dickt, Luxembourg
- 124 **Logomo Café**
Turku, Finland
- 128 **Majik Café**
Belgrade, Serbia
- 130 **Mazzo**
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 134 **McNally Jackson Cafe**
New York, USA
- 140 **Meltino Bar & Lounge**
Braga, Portugal
- 144 **Mishi Blyachera Café**
Dnipropetrovs'ka, Ukraine
- 148 **Mocha Mojo**
Chennai, India
- 152 **Muzeum Sztuki Café**
Lodz, Poland
- 156 **Petit Cabanon Café**
Lisbon, Portugal
- 160 **Phill Restaurant & Playground**
Ilfov, Romania
- 164 **Slowpoke Espresso**
Fitzroy, Australia
- 170 **Tokyo Baby Café**
Tokyo, Japan
- 176 **Urban Station**
Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 182 **Vyta Boulangerie Italiana**
Turin, Italy
- 186 **Z am Park**
Zurich, Switzerland
- 188 **zmianatematu**
Lodz, Poland
- 190 **Index Cafés**
- 191 **Index Architects**
- 192 **Photo Credits**

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Lodz, Poland
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Lisbon, Portugal
- 160 **Phill Restaurant & Playground**
Ilfov, Romania
- 164 **Slowpoke Espresso**
Fitzroy, Australia
- 170 **Tokyo Baby Café**
Tokyo, Japan
- 176 **Urban Station**
Buenos Aires, Argentina
- 182 **Vyta Boulangerie Italiana**
Turin, Italy
- 186 **Z am Park**
Zurich, Switzerland
- 188 **zmianatematu**
Lodz, Poland
- 190 **Index Cafés**
- 191 **Index Architects**
- 192 **Photo Credits**



above: Turkish coffeehouse (miniature, 16th century)
below: the first known illustration of an English coffeehouse (1674)

Coffee Houses

by Markus Hattstein

What is it that defines a "coffee house"? It's a difficult question to answer and indeed one that can never be answered definitively; for every coffee house since the concept first emerged reflects the tastes and preferences of the particular era and society in which it exists. Each coffee house can therefore be read in some way as a representation of its time and the history of coffee houses as the story of changing, developing societies. Coffee houses have always been more than simply a place to drink coffee – they are places of social interaction where information can be exchanged, ideas disseminated and the latest fashions paraded.

The first coffee houses

The first coffee houses were reputedly established in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1554. Modest shacks or tents were erected with simple seating arrangements – benches running along the walls or mats on the floor. Copper pots filled with hot water were balanced on top of tiled stoves whose fires burned continually – a sight still common today in some Oriental countries. Guests looked on while ground coffee was poured into the pot and the beverage prepared. Coffee sellers could also be found out on the streets, walking through cities offering the hot beverage to interested passersby.

Coffee arrived in western Europe sometime after 1620 and began to revolutionize earlier drinking habits and tastes. Within just a few years three new drinks – coffee, tea and cocoa – had altered the drinking habits of Europeans forever. The first coffee tavern was reputedly established in Vienna in 1647, while coffee houses in Oxford and London followed soon after, in 1650 and 1652 respectively. The first Dutch coffee house opened in The Hague in 1673 and the first German varieties in Bremen (1673) and Hamburg (1677) weren't far behind. Dark and cramped beer taverns or shops, modified a little for their

new purpose, often served as premises for these early enterprises. Known as "Caffee-Gewölbe" ("coffee vaults") or "Coffee-Stuben" ("coffee shops"), they were unornamented and furnished with plain wooden tables which were pushed together as necessary, and simple wooden benches, later replaced by wooden chairs. At first, visitors paid a fixed fee on entry (one penny in England), while later it became common practice for a cashier to give out tokens which were then cashed in for each cup of coffee.

Even in western Europe, the first coffee taverns were run by Oriental immigrants – Greeks, Armenians, Turks and Arabs, who faced fierce opposition from local guilds and fought a bitter and highly competitive battle against beer taverns and public houses. Vienna, later renowned for its coffee houses, was the site of one such battle. The rumor was spread by coffee house opponents that the imperial spy Georg Franz Kolschitzky had stolen some sacks of coffee beans (which the Viennese initially mistook for camel feed) from the defeated Turks as they fled from Vienna in 1683 and used them to open the first Viennese coffee shop. Yet it was actually an Armenian called Johannes Diodato who secured a monopoly in 1685 from Leopold I on the sale of coffee and tea in the city, a privilege that lasted 20 years. Later, it was mostly English and Dutch traders who ran the coffee houses in the towns and cities of Europe.

Until the 19th century only men were allowed to enter coffee houses (the female cashier being the sole exception), and indeed many cities and governments chose to enshrine this custom in law. Yet as coffee houses became increasingly well-established in European cities, so the dissatisfaction with the "gin palace" culture of these male-dominated institutions became increasingly vocal. This dissatisfaction manifested itself at first in newly erected coffee tents and pavilions as well as street taverns which could meet a growing demand from coffee drinkers to enjoy fresh air and a nice view along with their beverage.

left: scene in an English coffeehouse. A gentleman showered his opponent a hot cup of coffee in his face, after both had different opinions in a debate.

right: Jean Béraud, *La Pâtisserie Gloppe*, 1889. Oil on wood, 38 x 53 cm.

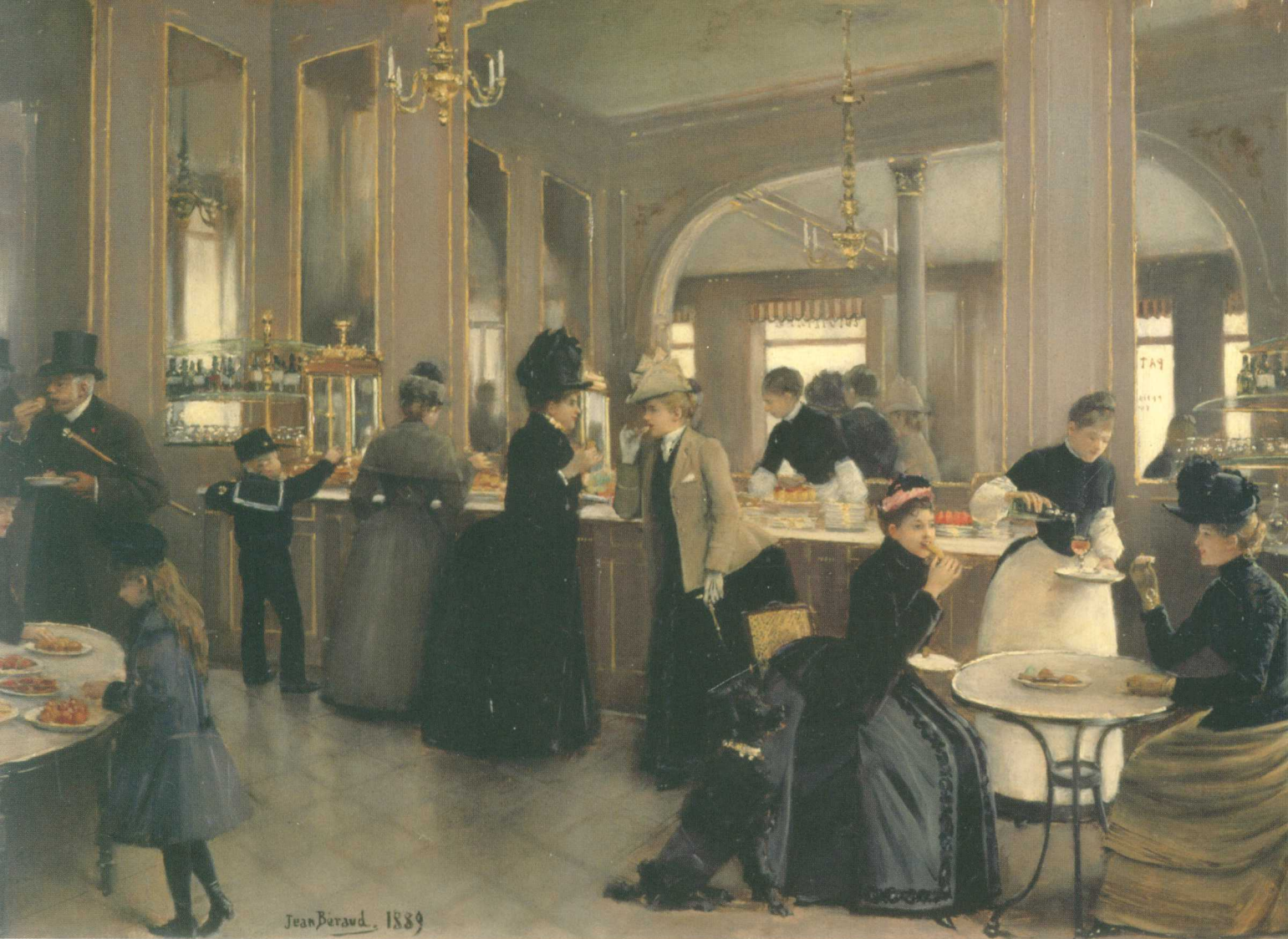
Eventually, Viennese lawmakers recognized this need and enshrined "Schanigärten" (pavement cafés) in law as fenced garden areas located in front of each café and belonging to the café owner.

Soon after, the first sumptuously decorated, light-filled coffee houses began to appear, spawning many others all over Europe in a similarly ostentatious style. The international standard was set with *Café Procope* (named after its founder, the Sicilian Procopio Cuttelli), established in Paris in 1686, with its tables made from slabs of marble and walls entirely of mirrors generating an illusion of vastness (a feature still to be found in many modern coffee shops). The desire among the social elite of the period both to observe and to be observed had never been met quite so flamboyantly as in *Café Procope*, which inspired numerous similarly boastful coffee houses in the central squares and streets of towns such as Venice. In 1720, *Caffé Florian* opened its doors to coffee drinkers for the first time and, before long, no self-respecting tourist to the city could leave without paying a visit. From the beginning of the 19th century, every coffee house that took at least a little pride in itself decked out its rooms with mirrored cabinets and luxurious, dainty interiors, so that many establishments exuded the air of small Rococo castles. The legendary *Silberne Kaffeehaus* ("Silver Coffee House"), which was opened by Ignaz Neuner in Vienna in 1808, served coffee in silver pots, while some featured coffee fountains or other ingenious technical gimmicks. The desire among guests to read over their coffee led to the introduction of more light in most coffee houses – in earlier days, guests had to pay a supplementary charge for candles, while these were later provided as a matter of course. As gas and then electric light were invented, larger coffee houses everywhere became some of the first public institutions to make use of these innovations. It seems that a few coffee house owners even seemed to make it their mission to overwhelm their guests with every possible modern luxury and grandiose feature. Perhaps the most famous example is the golden clad *Café New York* in Budapest, opened in 1894, reminiscent of a baroque church with its twisted columns in the interior.



From about 1850, chairs made from curved wood began to dominate the interior of simpler coffee houses. Named "Thonet" chairs after the furniture manufacturer Michael Thonet, these have been a key element of classic coffee house design ever since. More luxurious coffee houses often featured stylish "bent wood" chairs.

After 1800, genuine coffee houses began to find themselves facing competition. On the one hand, restaurants began to spring up outside France (where the first of those establishments had appeared) and many of them now combined eating areas with a designated area for serving coffee or even with their own coffee house. On the other hand, hotels discovered their guests' growing taste for coffee and opened their own coffee rooms, at first with separate areas for men and women. Even today, the lounge of a hotel in England is called a "coffee room", a name that originates in the early days of hotels, when hotel rooms were dark and sparsely furnished and all the activities of the guests, as well as meals, took place in the communal coffee room.



The bourgeois coffee house

The crowd found inside coffee houses has not always been diverse. Since the nobility and the upper classes preferred to savor their Oriental beverages privately in their own parlors, and the lower classes were happier in beer taverns, the coffee house of the 18th century became an institution of the bourgeoisie, more accurately, of bourgeois intellectuals. During this period, the custom developed of stocking coffee houses with copies of the most important national and local newspapers, which guests could read free of charge – it's now impossible to imagine a coffee house culture without this custom.

Leading the way were England and the Netherlands with their strong democratic traditions, as well as pre-revolutionary, newly enlightened France. The middle classes of the 18th century were hungry for education and information, both of which could be found in the innumerable newspapers and journals being printed in this period – before long, coffee houses in towns and cities across Europe were offering themselves as places where this desire to read and become informed could be met. Numerous debating and progressive pedagogical societies, mostly of a patriotic and democratic tendency, established

regular meetings in coffee houses. In England, bookshop owners began to seek locations near coffee houses, café owners set up bookshops and publishers came to coffee houses to advertise upcoming publications. Coffee houses that were particularly known for their encouragement of pedagogy earned the name "Penny Universities". In France, virtually all of the key enlightenment thinkers along with their critics and followers were regular coffee house visitors.

However, it was not only education and news that the middle classes sought in these coffee house gatherings – they also wanted to be entertained. As a result, games of cards and chance as well as board games became regular features of coffee house life, and it was not long before every half-decent coffee house had its own billiard table. There were chess cafés and coffee houses with their own games rooms – named in Vienna after a card game, "Tarockzimmer" ("tarot rooms") – and separate smoking saloons.

A few enterprising coffee house owners even began to entertain their guests with performances by singers and orchestras – the Venetian *Caffé Florian* even had its very own orchestra and, before long, no coffee could be drunk

in a Viennese coffee house without musical accompaniment from a string player, often influenced by "Schrammelmusik", a style of Viennese folk music named for the composers Johann and Josef Schrammel. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, waltzes by Strauss and other similarly undemanding styles of music found particular favor among the audiences of these new "concert cafés". Cabaret and variety performances also found their way into coffee houses at the end of the 19th century, while some establishments were transformed into picture palaces in the early 1900s for the new medium of film.

The emphasis on the bourgeois family in the Biedermeier era led to the dissolution of "men only" coffee houses in about 1870, replaced by family cafés that welcomed women. The public coffee culture was revolutionized: not only did cafés become the preferred destination for Sunday family outings, but "women only" cafés began to appear, often coupled with confectioners' shops. Exquisite cakes and sweet dainties were served alongside coffee, while the coffee itself was refined and enhanced with a range of added ingredients. Cafés became meeting points for the card games and coffee parties of slightly older ladies, mocked as "coffee aunts" or "coffee sisters". Cafés with specialty cakes became hugely popular, for example, *Café Sprüngli* in Zurich with its specialty chocolates, or *Café Prinzess* in Regensburg (opened in 1686), reputedly where individual filled chocolates (known in German as "Pralinen") were invented. The bourgeois café was no longer primarily a place for debates on politics and current affairs, but rather the epitome of comfort and relaxation. The presence of numerous cafés or coffee houses in every town and city in Europe, most prominently in the metropolises of the Habsburg Empire, was now taken for granted. In 1900, more than 600 coffee houses could be found in Vienna alone and more than 500 in Budapest.

The political coffee house and the working class café

In almost all European countries during the development of the coffee house, the instruments of state looked mostly unfavorably on them – a result of the free discus-

sion and debate that was enjoyed there and the subsequent development of increasing numbers of informed citizens. In England – the leading coffee-drinking nation in Europe before its citizens turned their attention to tea – the coffee house had scarcely become established before it became a central location for political quarrels between various parties and societies. The liberal Whigs and the conservative Tories each had their own preferred coffee houses and, before long, the term "coffee house politician" became widespread as a description of the self-important, grumbling politician often found there. Returning from exile in 1660, the Stuart King Charles II soon recognized the coffee house as a breeding ground for dissent and banned coffee houses completely in 1675. He had not reckoned, however, with the resulting uproar from both coffee house owners and their patrons, and he was forced to repeal the ban later that same year. In about 1700, there were around 2,000 coffee houses in London, and in 1730, the author Henry Fielding created a box office hit with his play, "The Coffee-House Politician".

In pre-revolutionary France it was the parties who would later initiate the French Revolution whose followers met and developed their ideas in coffee houses; in 1789, Paris alone could boast 800 of them. It was in the Parisian *Café de Foy* that "Les Enragés" ("the Enraged Ones", a group of radicals active during the French Revolution) agreed on their demand for the universal arming of the people and eventually founded the Jacobin Party, who met in various coffee houses that then became known as "Jacobin Cafés". Many later popular speakers for the revolution, such as the journalist Camille Desmoulins, tested their ideas and rhetoric in front of coffee house audiences before braving the larger, more critical audiences out on the streets. In the late 1790s, leading politicians and party representatives continued to meet regularly in Parisian coffee houses.

German Jacobins, too, chose to gather in coffee houses, most notably in Mainz, and this habit became so closely associated with them that they were often described as "Kaffeehauspolitiker" (coffee-house politicians) in police reports.



Lesser Ury, evening at Café Bauer, 1898.

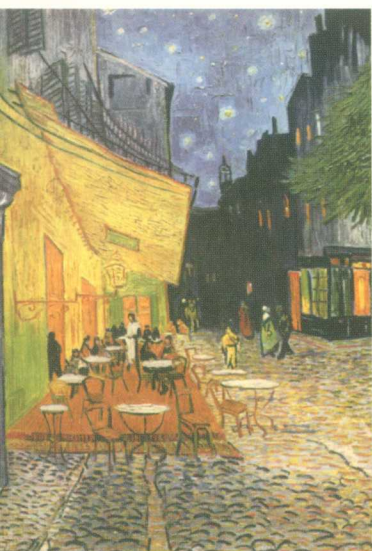
The famed “emigrant cafés” should also be mentioned in the context of political coffee houses. Frequented mostly by politically persecuted intellectuals from Germany, Italy, Poland and Russia, most were located in France, although a few could be found in other liberal countries such as England and Switzerland. Georg Büchner, Ferdinand Freiligrath and Wilhelm Weitling could often be found at such cafés in Switzerland, and Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne, Karl Marx and Giuseppe Mazzini in French coffee houses. The “German Coffee House” in London became a meeting point for German immigrants who had been forced to flee after the suppression of the 1848 Revolution, and the *Café des Boulevards* welcomed a similar clientele in Brussels. In Geneva, socialist Russian immigrants gathered in *Café-Brasserie Landolt*, which played host to key figures including Lenin, who could often be found playing chess there.

The working classes needed a little more time before they found their place in coffee house culture – it was an institution that had long been reserved for the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia of European society. Socialist politicians, however, began to use coffee houses as locations for educating the lower classes, both in politics and more generally – a method which also functioned as a means of reducing the otherwise excessive consumption of alcohol among the working classes in pubs and gin palaces. As a result, many coffee houses became known as “proletarian cafés” or “people’s coffee houses”, and village pubs began offering coffee alongside alcohol or even became coffee shops. In more urban areas, new coffee shops were built specifically for cab drivers and travelers, who drank their morning coffee in these “Kaffeeklappen” (as they became affectionately known among Berliners). Workers’ organizations and working class parties met regularly in locked rooms in coffee houses, and even temperance societies began to voice their approval of both cafés and coffee for their promotion of a healthier way of life than one fuelled by alcohol. After 1876 vast “people’s coffee halls” began to open in every large industrial city, supported by state and charitable health care institutions, for the mass provision of coffee and tea at little cost; in 1888 there were already 28 of them across Germany, at least one in every city.

From this period until well into the age of Metternich, coffee houses and their guests were often under state surveillance and were frequently featured in the reports of police informants and spies. In Berlin in the years preceding the 1848 German revolution, *Café Stehely* played a key role as a meeting place for the “Doctor’s Club”, a gathering of young Hegelians. Among this group were several figures who would later alter the course of German philosophy including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, both of whom were members for several years. The above-mentioned *Silberne Kaffeehaus* in Vienna became the meeting point for liberal opponents of the Metternichs in Austria, a cause supported by the café’s owner Ignaz Neuner. The intellectual impetus for the European revolutions of 1830 and 1848/49 was nurtured to a great extent in metropolitan coffee houses – the Venetian regularly hosted the secret revolutionary societies known as the “Carbonari”, while democratically minded Hungarians met under the leadership of the poet Sándor Petőfi in *Café Pilyax* in Budapest. Both movements then used these coffee houses as the locations from which to launch their assault on the Habsburg absolutism that they detested.



Congestion on one of the first espresso bars in London in the 1950s.



left: Vincent van Gogh, Café Terrace at Night, 1888.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 65,5 cm.
right: Juan Gris, Man in the Café, 1912.
Oil on canvas, 128,2 x 88 cm.