

Coffeehouses Are Not Places For The Timid

I am NOT addicted to caffeine - I can stop any time I want to.

You guessed it – I don't want to. In fact, my "affinity" for caffeine is getting worse. The office coffeepot is no longer satisfying my growing needs.

After years of brewing coffee myself, I've started checking out places like Java House and Starbucks. These are very sad places. Under the veneer of seemingly normal and happy patrons lay wretched addicts feeding their insatiable demons.

Then again, so what? They're not hurting anybody. This is socially accepted depravity. Lighten up.

The first thing you'll notice in any coffeehouse is that there is always a line. Often a long line. I was standing in one the other day listening to the couple in front of me.

"I swear there are exactly two employees in this place," fumed the woman. "Two!" exclaimed the man. "When did they hire the other one?"

Before you attempt to order anything for the first time in a coffeehouse, I recommend you make a dry run. Read the menus posted in these places – for your average Folgers drinker, they're indecipherable. And the actual word "coffee" appears very few times.

What the heck is Brazil Ipanema Bourbon? Or Aged Sumatra Lot 523, Crop Year 1998? There are vintages now?

Just try to order a small cup of regular coffee. There is no small. There is no regular. Hurry up - there are people behind you in line tapping their feet impatiently. Either that or they are dissipating their caffeine jitters.

My first experience at a coffee shop was not a good one. Not recognizing any of my menu options, I selected one at random. It was called something

like Colombian Midnight Asphalt Java, which required me to chew each mouthful 17 times before it could be swallowed.

And I'm a guy that dumps half-n-half and sugar in my coffee to the point that I need to drink the stuff quickly before it hardens.

Finally, LuAnn suggested the café latte as a safe choice for beginners. With a minimum of additional ingredients, it goes down pretty easily. So far I'm still scared of the other menu options, so that's all I order.

Of course, it's just a matter of time before I start to experiment with the hard stuff. I used to think the final step of my "affinity" would be to work at least part-time in a coffee shop. That is, until an experience LuAnn and I had a couple of weeks ago.

We were on vacation, and we happened across a tiny coffee shop in the Vail ski resort parking ramp, of all places. Behind the counter was a skinny kid of about 18 with greasy hair held down by a stocking hat. He was mopping the floor rather frantically.

I looked around in vain for any other employees, and I finally asked, "Are you the coffee guy?"

His head snapped up like he'd been shot, and he said, "Absolutely! What can I getcha?"

With an air of supreme confidence, I ordered the café latte. He was working away busily behind the counter when he suddenly said, "I'm so excited, I'm moving into a new place this week!"

I looked behind me for whoever he could be talking to, and it turned out it had to be me. He continued without looking up, "Yeah, I'm moving out of my girlfriend's apartment. Finally, I'll be living in a place without any women!"

He looked up at me expectantly (I noticed his pupils were dilated) and I felt like I had to respond. Making sure LuAnn was beyond elbow distance, I said, "Sounds like Paradise."

He nodded enthusiastically and continued to chatter. "Actually, I wasn't living with my girlfriend as much as with her dog."

I had no idea what he meant, and he was making me nervous. How long can it take to steam milk? After again gauging LuAnn's proximity I said, "At least dogs do what you tell them to most of the time."

He laughed with the exuberance of someone sampling way too much of his own product, and handed me my coffee. As LuAnn and I walked away, she said to me, "I'll bet his girlfriend threw him out." Yeah.

So maybe I should think about cutting back on the caffeine. I guess I'll start ordering the Decaf if that's what they still call it, and if I can find it on the menu.