

## A Purrfect Pairing: How Cats and Coffee Create a Harmony Unlike Any Other



(Photo by Gwendolyn Knapp)

**Questions answered regarding the article:** My ideal audience would be someone who likes cats, coffee, and lives in the Houston area. Any age would be appropriate since this is a feel-good story. This type of feature is nice during the holidays as it represents the joy of adopting, giving back to the community and a hot beverage on these colder days. The Houston Chronicle would be an ideal choice since the place I am writing about is in the Heights. It would fit nicely in the food and culture section under restaurants and bars. Kelly Ann Scott is the editor at Houston Chronicle, and she can be reached at [kelly.scott@houstonchronicle.com](mailto:kelly.scott@houstonchronicle.com). This article highlights a local organization that uniquely assists in rehoming cats and using coffee to do it. It is a good holiday read also.

It was a cold and dreary day in Houston. End of November to be exact. Wanting to avoid the hustle and bustle of another Starbucks, I needed something warm and comforting in my system, a place to relax without the crowds and noise.

So, I strolled up to a vibrant, cozy coffeehouse tucked away on 508 Pecore Street in the Houston Heights area. The neighborhood was old, yet had a nostalgic feel, and not in a shopping center. Most of the homes and buildings in the area were constructed in the early 1900's. No home looked the same and even more can be said about this coffeehouse.

However, this is not just any coffeehouse, it is El Gato Coffeehouse. Gato is a Spanish word that means “cat” in English. Combining that with coffee makes one wonder- what kind of coffeehouse is this?

The pandemic was a horrific time for everyone, and many animals had been forgotten. However, clever and unusual businesses were invented like El Gato Coffeehouse. It serves as a nonprofit shelter for cats with a mission of finding and fostering loving homes for rescue cats while serving up a small, tasty menu and offering cat therapy to people who cannot have a feline friend of their own.

Curiously walking into the neon green cottage and not knowing what to expect, I am greeted by the cat-themed host. Asking a few questions, one of which was odd, she asked for reservations, which I did not have. However, she explained the reason for the reservations but made an exception. Many people love coming here so reservations are recommended.

Placing an order for a hot chai latte along with an orange cranberry cookie, I was afterwards escorted through two doors. Walking into some unknown territory, my apprehension was melted by the soft meows, big eyes, and small furry bodies that ran about.

The host showed me around the homely cottage, and I had a seat near the window. Immediately capturing my attention, I felt the brush of Princess Gracie on my leg. I had no choice but to pet her shiny black and white coat.

More kitties rushed over craving for attention while I enjoyed the delicious cinnamon flavored chai latte that was served. The hot drink was a perfect pairing with the soft warm orange cranberry cookie on this chilly day. It helped accent the holiday season in a perfect way.

Enjoying the exquisite sweets, and playing with the kitties and their string toys, this felt like being at home. The home was adorned with cat paintings, homely furniture, and every toy a cat would revel in.



(Photos by Erin Watkins)

The coffeehouse takes in 15-20 cats from the street as well as those on the “kill list” at BARC. They have rehomed 650 cats since opening!

Their process of adoption is creative, but I wanted to know more. Leah McFadden was one of the owners. Wearing a gray cat themed t-shirt, jeans, stylish shoulder length white hair, and a bright beautiful smile, she was very friendly when approached. She was open to discussing the history of this place and why it got started.

“Animal shelters can be stressful for any animal placed in one. That is where the inspiration came in.” Leah said. “It is hard for a cat’s personality to shine when they are stressed and cooped up in a noisy, cramped environment.” She went on to describe the pandemic as being a time to come together with her colleagues and assist the cats when no one else could.

Cats tend to be relaxing pets for many people. That is where the concept of cat therapy comes in. Animal therapy offers clients a sense of purpose, focuses on relationship patterns, and improves social skills and self-esteem through increased trust in cats.

According to Psychmed “Animal–human interaction not only reduces stress, anxiety, and depression but it can help those with sensory issues and conditions such as autism. Additionally, it can provide support for elderly people, especially those with dementia or memory problems.”

Cats usually have a calming presence and a friendly nature. Petting cats can be therapeutic, especially on their head and cheeks, as it releases endorphins, lowers cortisol levels, and reduces stress hormones. Cats purring, often associated with contentment, is soothing, boosting happiness for both cats and their humans.

Listening to the crackling purrs served as a relaxing experience while enjoying a warm drink. Witnessing other individuals that experienced the same thing was obvious how therapeutic something as simple as this can be to the human mind. During Covid, it is evident this place helped bring a sense of relaxation into the community.

Cat therapy can also enhance social skills and alleviate feelings of isolation, providing a bridge between individuals struggling with social anxiety. Spending time with affectionate cats offers a sense of companionship and connection that is hard to find elsewhere.

Having owned many cats, I can attest to the sense of relief when I come home after a long day and being greeted by my furry companion who simply wants love and his favorite treat!

Considering the educational conversation with Leah, made me thankful for innovative places like this that exist. Not only is it a safe haven for cats, but it also provides comfort to people who may not be able to have their own cat.

The bonus is the cafe part of the organization. They offer hot and cold teas, coffees, lattes, other beverages, and small bites such as cookies and cinnamon rolls. Even if you are not able to adopt, there are other ways that you can contribute such as donations, sponsoring a cat, providing temporary foster care, volunteering, and donating cat items.

Now the only problem with visiting a place like this is leaving. From the delectable beverages and treats, all the adorable faces you will see, and the extra fur on your clothes, it is hard to resist not adopting your next fur baby. At least this place defines one of the positives that came from the pandemic.