

Yours Sincerely

I do much of my writing at Zumi's. It's our local coffee shop – fair trade, all organic and the best coffee north of Boston. It's owned by Umesh Bhaju, a member of the Newar tribe from Nepal. In his younger days he was a Himalayan guide and we locals like to tell visitors that he's been up and down Everest as often as a spider in a rainspout. That is, I have to admit, an exaggeration, but we're not ones to let facts get in the way of a good story. Now, all that's neither here nor there, though it is kinda interesting.

The point I want to make is that I was pre-tuned in, as it were, to Randall Decoteau's article on restoring the Charlton Coffee House in Colonial Williamsburg (p.76). When finished, it'll be the only restored eighteenth-century coffee house in America, but there's a long history behind both it and Zumi's

The first London coffeehouse opened in 1652 and by 1739 there were 551 of them in the city. Coffee quickly gained the reputation for stimulating intelligent conversation, as opposed to ale and spirits. Indeed, eighteenth-century coffee houses were sometimes called "Penny Universities." They charged a penny to enter, but thereafter the coffee, newspapers and conversation were free. In these terms Zumi's is a free university, for it hosts free regular presentations on a range of earth-friendly topics – one recent one was on the Coffeelands Landmine Trust: 70 percent of coffee-producing countries have major landmine issues. Now that's something the eighteenth century never had to deal with.

Modern science was born in coffee houses: Christopher Wren, the architect; Edmund Halley, the astronomer; and Isaac Newton, the physicist, all expounded early versions of their theories in coffee houses. Coffee produced the theory of gravity – think of that, without coffee we'd never have known which way to fall.

In 1680, the insurance business began in Edward Lloyd's Coffee House (Lloyd's of London is still one of the world's largest insurance markets). So did the stock exchange: a 1695 broker's ad reads, "John Castaing at Jonathan's Coffee House on Exchange Buys and Sells...all Stocks and Shares." The New York Stock Exchange was also born in a coffee house – the Tontine Coffee House on the corner of Wall and Water Streets in 1792, where it remained until 1817. In the words of its president, it was a place "filled with underwriters, brokers, merchants, traders and politicians; selling, purchasing, trafficking or insuring; some reading, others eagerly inquiring the news...Everything was in motion; all was life, bustle and activity."

Coffee houses and politics are like Siamese twins. Charles II tried to suppress them as "places where the disaffected met, and spread scandalous reports concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers." In Philadelphia, the Merchant's Coffee House (also known, confusingly, as the City Tavern) hosted members of the First Continental Congress as well as luminaries such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Lafayette and John Adams who called it, "The most genteel tavern in the country."

Literature and the arts flourished in them. Starving artists would frequent them, showing their works and looking for patrons – Zumi's also hangs works by local artists, though I doubt they're starving.



Coffee houses had rules of good conduct. In them, all men were equal and none need give his place to a "finer" man. Anyone who swore was made to "forfeit twelve pence," and the man who began a quarrel "shall give each man a dish to atone the sin." "Maudlin lovers" were forbidden "here in Corners to mourn," for all were expected to "be brisk, and talk, but not too much." We don't need such rules in Zumi's, we follow them instinctively.

Now, in those early coffee houses, the talk may have been a tad smarter than at Zumi's – I haven't met the Isaac Newton of the twenty-first century yet, at least as far as I know. But Zumi's coffee is incomparably better. It must be. Coffee then was taxed by the gallon, so coffee houses had to make their day's supply in large, measured vats, from which they would serve cupfuls upon demand. By evening, the coffee must have taken the enamel off your teeth. Give me Zumi's fresh brewed Katmandu any day of the week.

I love the thought that Addison and Steele edited *The Spectator* in a coffee house, not that I'm comparing myself to them, nor *NEAJ* to the first, and some say still the best, literary-political magazine ever published. But I do enjoy the sense that I'm part of a long tradition of smart people when I go to Zumi's for my daily brain boost.

Yours sincerely,

John Ficke

"Coffee leads men to trifle away their time, scald their chops, and spend their money, all for a little base, black, thick, nasty, bitter, stinking, nauseous puddle water." *The Women's Petition Against Coffee, 1674.*

"Among the numerous luxuries of the table...coffee may be considered as one of the most valuable. It excites cheerfulness without intoxication; and the pleasing flow of spirits which it occasions...is never followed by sadness, languor or debility." *Benjamin Franklin.*