



Frantisek Strouhal, *Resting with a Cup of Tea*

Café Comfort

CATHY FIORELLO

BEING AN UNABASHED FRANCOPHILE, EVEN during our national temper tantrum that put Freedom Fries on the menu during the Iraq war, my fries were always French. One of the things I love most about living in San Francisco is its many similarities to Paris, nowhere more so than in the café culture. Though separated by an ocean and a continent, San Francisco and Paris are cut from the same café cloth.

There are other similarities between the two; they are not called sister cities just for the way coffee is consumed. They are both architecturally beautiful and philosophically inclusive. They each have a history and traditions they fiercely protect. Their focus is not on change; they like who they are and what they have and will march (in San Francisco) or strike (in Paris) to preserve it.



In San Francisco, as in Paris, there are cafés everywhere. North Beach is one big sidewalk café; one has to walk single file to traverse the area and then share even that narrow space with dogs leashed to parking meters. Which brings to mind another sister city similarity: Both adore their dogs, who are walked, carried, and driven everywhere their owners go. Parisian pets, however, are invited inside the cafés. A bowl of water is placed under Madame's table for her guest. And one dog per Parisian seems to be enough. San Franciscans, like most Americans, need more than enough of a good thing and are often seen hanging on to two or three leashes.

Even with so many cafés to choose from, when the need for a cup and companionship arises, we usually head to the same place, which we think of as our place. We may even have a favorite table at that place and a coffee choice that becomes identified with us and is served by a savvy waiter as soon as we are seated. This is what I call café comfort. You can't buy it; you're just happy to be living it.

American cafés are obsessed with size, and one has to learn an esoteric vocabulary to assure getting the right amount of coffee. For instance, just ordering a "small" doesn't do it. In one café chain, if you want a small coffee, you have to

order a "tall." It's even possible to get a smaller than small cup; just order a "short," which at first I thought was yet another barb on the height-challenged—that's American for "short." In Paris cafés, size is not a factor. There is no large and no cup runneth over. They are tiny and never filled to the brim. Parisians don't drink coffee out of soup bowls that require two hands to lift.

If eavesdropping in public places is your thing, you will find much in Paris to cherish. One day I sat alone at a café on the Boulevard St. Germain, tuned in to the conversations around me. The man at the next table summoned the waiter and ordered a refill. I knew he was American when he said, "This time, fill the cup."

Both Parisians and San Franciscans love to linger at their cafés, but they linger differently. In Paris, one sits and observes the passing scene. In any direction one looks, there is something to soothe the soul: the spire on a historic cathedral, the bateau traffic on the Seine, the smartly turned-out Parisian women. Even just staring into space is a respected activity.

While Americans also linger at their cafés, they have not yet learned the European art of relaxation. As soon as they are seated, out comes the laptop. I've come to the conclusion that in San Francisco, the great American pastime is writing the Great American Novel. If café patrons aren't writing, they're conducting business on their cell phones.

The unique similarity in both places is that waiters do not intrude—not on the serenity of Parisians nor on the busyness of San Franciscans. I was once at a café on Market Street during the peak lunchtime crush. Every table was occupied; there was a line waiting to be seated. When four people vacated the two tables next to mine, two men quickly claimed both. They set up a chess board on one, their lunch on the other, and settled in for a long, intense game. Being from New York, I expected an exasperated waiter to loom over them and "ask" them to free up one table, fold up their game board, drink up, and move out. It never happened. It's quite possible that those two men are still at those two tables. Chess, after all, is a game that cannot be rushed. ☼