

Coffee Bars Invade

By SARAH JOHNSON

MONTREAL (CUP)—What has happened to the coffeehouse culture once synonymous with beatniks, black turtlenecks, pretentious poetry and folk music? While small, independent coffeehouses that host poetry and hang local artwork on their walls still exist in large numbers, the more ubiquitous coffeehouse symbols today are the large, corporate chains that seem to pop up every other day.

The dark, smoky, struggling coffeehouse is now the clean, well-lit, smoke-free, financially stable coffeebar.

The coffeehouse has been around in the Middle East and Europe for centuries. During the 1950s, coffeehouses began emerging in the U.S. Rooted in the bohemian tradition of the cafes of the Left Bank, the American coffeehouse had a reputation for being a haven of subversive thought. Coffee was not the emphasis — it was just something to go with your cigarette and conversation.

The coffeebar, in its present incarnation, is a relatively new phenomenon. The Second Cup, Canada's largest coffeebar chain, only arrived in Montreal three years ago.

But is the coffeebar just another trend? Not as far as Starbucks is concerned. Currently the largest coffeebar

chain in North America, Starbucks was transformed in the mid-1980s when CEO Howard Schultz went to Italy.

Charmed by the coziness of the Italian coffeebar, Schultz decided to recreate that feeling in North America. His first step was to base the store around espresso, a drink with limited exposure in North America, rather than straight coffee.

With 1995 sales of \$631 million (US), North Americans seem charmed by his interpretation.

Currently, there are more than 970 Starbucks across North America and Japan. From its Seattle headquarters, Starbucks is planning to expand throughout the Pacific Rim and into Europe. Some financial consultants estimate that the number of coffeebars will quintuple in the next five years.

For some, this is a sure sign that the trend is about to peak. And not surprisingly, as Starbucks becomes more and more of an urban presence, it has begun to experience a backlash. In Minneapolis, one community successfully organized to keep Starbucks out of their neighbourhood, citing the need to protect the local coffeehouse and businesses.

While such occurrences may be rare, Toronto experienced a similar reaction last year when two downtown To-

ronto coffeebar neighbourhoods heard that Starbucks was planning to move in. Although they were not successful in stopping the Starbucks' openings, their protest sparked a city-wide debate about the meaning of community.

With such complete infiltration by the chains into the consciousness of coffee drinking and non-coffee drinking North Americans, where do the independent coffeehouses and bars stand a chance?

The entire concept of the coffeehouse has been redefined in North American terms — while emphasis is on a quality product, it is also on quantity and profit. As we become addicted to caffeine by the masses, the coffeebar will become just another stop in our daily routine.

As far away from their roots as they have gone, Starbucks and other chains would like nothing more than to be that necessary stop in our daily routines. And while they insist that the market is big enough for everyone, there may not be a place for an independent coffeehouse when a chain coffeebar sprouts up on every corner.

But as more and more coffeebars show up everywhere, will they just assume the coziness of another neighbourhood institution, McDonalds?

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