Oh, That Coffee Buzz

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A few weeks ago, uprooting a decade of urban grounding, my wife and I departed Manhattan and arrived at the venerable hamlet of Naugahyde, an old Indian word meaning *small town without mall*. Leaving our accustomed urban amenities and stimulation, we got a larger, quieter living space, trading wood-oven pizza, great bagels, and sublime sushi for a yard with wild squirrels, bambis, and blue jays. When the residents inquire and find that we have no children, the standard response is: "Are you f___ crazy? Why did you move here?"

Naugahyde is a rural rookery for rug-rats. Each weekday morning, streams of Jeep Grand Cherokee converge at the center of town, pass the public library and the many realty offices, drop the sleep-glazed breadwinner off at the utilitarian commuter train depot, and then shuttle the towheaded, overachieving children over to the highly-rated local schools. For unknown hereditary reasons, the regimen in the urbs omits eating in public or enjoying food in general. American suburbs ban decent restaurants and mandate markets with a selection of yard long loaves of Wonder Bread, bathtubs of aerated Jiffy peanut butter, construction bricks of Velveeta process cheese, and vats of Welch's shimmery grape jelly.

Good writing like sex requires flow and contact. So working solo means finding ways to be around people: going to movies instead of renting videos, eating at restaurants instead of ordering in, working out at a gym instead of exercising at home. And for the morning cuppa, eschewing broth-like General Foods Suisse Mocha in the kitchen and heading for weapons- grade java at one of the many neighborhood bean emporia.

In New York, at the start of every day, I would venture out of the house and stroll past the multitude of opportunities: the dizzy red modernist Sunburst Cafe, the obscure Bagel and Bean, the mass production S. Kinder, or the all-night Korean Dinasty Deli. Each one is a modern temple to caffeine, the alkaloid of choice in our society. Antoine de Saint Exupery in *Wind, Sand and Stars*, writes of receiving this matutinal sacrament from the hands of life: "The joy of living was summed up in the remembered sensation of that first burning and aromatic swallow, that mixture of milk and coffee and bread by which men hold communion with tranquil pastures, exotic plantations, and golden harvests, communion with the earth." I have experienced that epiphany in Paris, basking in the warm sunlight while breakfasting on buttery croissants and intensely rich French Roast swirled with freshest cream.

My preferred Manhattan destination, the News Bar, was an alcove in the epicenter of Manhattan's busy photo district. Besides the normal draw of downtown crowd on the way to work, the clientele milling about its unpainted steel tables included a sampling of local photographers, models, agents, graphic designers, and ad folks. After an hour, one had comfortably tuned into buzz that hadn't come near Oprah or Montell yet.

What sets it apart from its brethren isn't the freshness of its beans and grinds but of the information it served. Wallracks, with 397 different magazine and newspaper titles from across the globe, three television sets simultaneously blasting CNN and MTV, and the Apple at the front table wired into the Internet compete for attention. Where else, for the price of a cup of coffee, can one stay current in any field or subject?

But in Naugahyde, the only cafe available is a 10 mile traverse over soon to be snowy country roads to the next village. There stands Starbucks Coffee, the county's sole Mecca for the self-employed. The store's accent is on coffeeshop. Instead of newspapers, an antique coffee mill graces the counter. There are numerous colorful and cutesy coffee-related items for sale. The sound system plays muted baroque guitar concerti. The decor is clean, subdued, and mellow.

The early morning traffic, intent commuters in a hurry, refill their very own Starbucks "grande" size plastic insulated mug as their simpatico travel companion for the hour drive or train hop into Manhattan. A few regulars stay and sip their coffee, silently peruse a New York Times, and quickly slip back to their daily grind, taking their paper with them. Around 9 AM, the scene shifts, and duck-bobbed blondes, escaping their children and the waiting chores at home, wander in and greet their friends for relaxed kaffeklatch.

With four times the space, Starbucks has the same number of tables and staff as the News Bar but the lackadaisical service and hyper-intensity vacuum belie their kinship. Still, with a dearth of alternatives, everyone is carefully grateful that the six month old store exists at all. Since the time of Johnson, Ben not Lyndon, a cafe has functioned mainly as the vital social watering hole, inspiration before chat lines and bulletin boards, and never as just another hole in the mall. Latte is never enough.