

George Mason University

# De Clieu Coffee and Community

Literary Journalism

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Gabriel-Mathieu Francois D'ceus de Clieu is a large name in coffee, but the average Northern Virginian coffee drinker wouldn't know about him if it weren't for the shop, De Clieu Coffee and Sandwiches, that opened in downtown Fairfax a little over two years ago. Although the details are fuzzy, de Clieu is widely credited with bringing coffee from France to the Caribbean in 1720 — he managed to transport a single sapling from a Dutch coffee tree across the Atlantic to the island of Martinique. This brave little seedling endured storms, pirates, and alleged Dutch spies to make it to the island. Once planted, the sapling thrived and supposedly sparked the now \$100 billion world-wide coffee industry; so, if you have ever had a cup of coffee while living in the Western hemisphere, you have de Clieu to thank.

It's 10:00am on the day before Thanksgiving, and bright sunlight streams through the windows lining the two exterior walls of the shop. Across from a service elevator shaft, a record player hugs the wall between the kitchen and the bathrooms — customers are not only encouraged to browse the vinyl, but to also choose the songs that will play next. Already, someone has decided to ramp up their morning by playing R.E.M's "Losing My Religion" for everyone not wearing earbuds. The shop is crowded — every table is taken except for a four-top and a long, rectangular table located in the exact middle of the sitting area.

Jade, the owner and manager of De Clieu, is at the register, and two more baristas can be seen cleaning the recently acquired breakfast dishes through the doorway behind her that leads to the small kitchen area in the back. She says, "Oh, hi Rebecca! How are you? You look great! Oooohhhh, a latte today? Perfect! I love making latte! For you, discount!" She excitedly greets everyone who orders — asking them about their day, how they're doing, whether or not they have plans for the holiday. This habit of hers means that drinks sometimes take more than five

minutes to reach the consumer, but the feeling of overwhelming welcome slightly makes up for the wait time.

A dark-haired man with shadows under his eyes sits alone at the table for eight, so I join him with my coffee – taking a table for 4 when you’re by yourself is the cardinal sin of the local coffee shop. We casually begin chatting, and the conversation turns to the day’s projects. “I was about to say [I was working on] my day job, but that would be untrue. I’m currently looking for new work opportunities, both internally and externally.” His office is still open today, but he instead opted to telecommute – he doesn’t want anyone from work to know he’s thinking of leaving. He soon replaces his noise-cancelling earbuds (now drowning out Journey’s “Wheel in the Sky”), and he begins to type again. He remains completely entranced for the next hour, even as customers constantly brush up against his chair while jostling in line to order.

There is no doubt that the coffee industry is indeed thriving today. Take Andy Hoefer – an unsuspecting professor sitting at the opposite end of the table for eight. With a green George Mason jacket, a laptop, and a stack of papers, he looks like he’s in it for the long haul. He says, “Sometimes there are things I need to get done where I don’t want to be interrupted... I wrote my dissertation at a local coffee shop, which quickly became my local community.” As an avid coffee fan, he believes that De Clieu specifically wants to build that environment – the layout and the free WIFI encourage people to come in and stay for hours. The large windows gently light the space with a natural, non-industrial feeling, and seasonal decorations of leaves, cranberries, and paper turkeys casually line the counters and bar areas. According to Andy, “When you’re at school or at the office, everyone has the same stresses; but, at the coffee shop, even though you all have different problems, you still have that same understanding. It really builds community.” He left shortly after realizing that his laptop would be unable to connect to

the WIFI until 3:00pm, so the office seemed like the only choice for him to complete the work he set out to do before the holiday.

True to the Caribbean influence of their stores' namesake, De Clieu serves Intelligentsia coffee – a coffee brand known for its investment in Latin American beans. Intelligentsia coffee is known for their commitment to the environment, to small business owners, and to quality bean production and processing – but their flavor profiles are all shockingly similar to each other. Their darkest roast is their *Black Cat Classic Espresso* – a Brazilian and Costa Rican Blend, followed closely by *El Diablo* a dark roast made with a rotating cast of seasonal coffee beans. Because most of their coffees are dark roasts, the citrus, bright, and acidic flavor profile of the beans blends interestingly with the heavy body, aroma, and aftertaste that dark roasts typically embody. If you are looking for a mellow, non-acerbic coffee, this shop is not for you; but, most people here today aren't enjoying just the coffee: several tables are littered with newspapers from nearly completed breakfast items or pastries, water or tea occasionally occupy mugs next to laptops, and sometimes patrons brazenly occupy window seats without any purchased item in sight.

Krystal D'Costa with *Scientific American* believes that the most likely explanation for the popularity of coffee shops is because of the American emphasis on productivity. With so much demand for constant production, the need to sustain that export is aided by caffeine consumption. “We consume coffee as a means of performing the tasks we need to complete in the setting of the workplace. And if we all do it, then it normalizes the behavior and helps us believe that we are achieving optimal levels of productivity.” It is now 11:00 am, and her theory seems to be playing out in the mellow November sunlight: the majority of people are on laptops, although one couple and one family (on opposite ends of the shop), are engaging in lively conversations. The young

couple are defining their relationship over muffins and coffee – the older couple are corralling their grandchildren with promises of cookies if they’ll just sit still for five more minutes and listen to Aerosmith’s “Dream On” now playing through the speakers located above both condiment bars.

A new man joins the large table located directly in the center of the shop, and he certainly doesn’t seem to fit the stereotype of an electronic wielding, chronically overworked millennial. Although he is in his early thirties, and sports both heavy rimmed glasses and a beanie, he has instead replaced the laptop with a lapdog and neglects his phone and tablet in hopes of stirring up conversation. Barkley, the three-month-old dog, needs socialization, and so does Bryan; so, they decided to go to a relatively easygoing and warm (outside the temperature is a brisk 44 degrees), place to do it. As Bryan rescues a loudly protesting Barkley from an overzealous woman trying to walk out with him, he says, “I used to live in New York and people just bring their dogs everywhere; but here, everyone is very isolated. I like it here because it feels very lively and you can be social if you want to be.” Having a dog is apparently the best cure against isolation because more than twenty patrons approach Bryan over the next four hours.

Neil Wagner from *The Atlantic* offers his thoughts about the social dynamics of coffee shops: “Make your purchase and the seat is yours – if you can find one. What you do with it and how long you sit there is pretty much your own business.” One older man typing furiously away seems to have taken this philosophy to heart: Russel Ginns has been occupying coffee shops for the majority of his professional career as an author and teacher. “If I just work at home, I get nothing done. This is my ritual – I go to a coffee shop in the morning and work for an hour or two. Then I go home and am productive for the rest of the day. If I just stay at home, then it’s suddenly 3 in the afternoon and I’m still in my pajamas.”

Coffee shops appear to be a great place for networking, not only have Professor Hoefler and Russel Ginns talked extensively about their involvement with writing and the community of coffee shops; at the eight-top table, Bryan and Barkley are currently engaging with two young anthropology students frantically trying to finish a paper before its impending due date, and a psychology student is currently on a phone interview for a government job at the table behind me. Russel mentions that he doesn't do 'fancy' coffee drinks, "it's too easy to drink 1,000 calories in under an hour". He brings his own food and drinks most days and keeps them conveniently tucked under the table in a small, blue, portable cooler. When he does buy his daily price of admission, he normally sticks to whichever dark coffee is being served that day. "This is the golden age of writing, and that's my whole story..."

The American Conservative author Gracy Olmstead wonders whether coffee is more akin to cultural remembrance or cultural engagement – do we drink coffee because we like it, or because we've made a community out of it? "... for some of us, coffee is just another good excuse to spend time together: a tasty, happy tradition, worth preserving for its various merits, and for its ability to help us connect." Her article explores the space that coffee shops provide for people actively seeking community, (those who come with other people to have coffee with); however, there is no mention of the people you might meet once you're there, the accidental community tied together through common drink choices.

Behind the counter, Jade and fellow barista John are trying to reconnect the credit card machine – maybe the cash-only policy of the morning will be removed now that the WIFI is back up. Apparently, this policy will be in place for a little bit longer because John has started dancing while Jade randomly pushes buttons on the screen. He stops as a customer comes over to order a blended ice-cream drink for her daughter. De Clieu normally offers gelatoccinos – an

attempt to jump on the Frappuccino bandwagon, except without any powdered sugar or carrageenan – so, a brightly lit cooler always tempts small children with its array of different frozen snacks. Unfortunately, the store’s shipment of gelato didn’t come this week because of Thanksgiving, so the young girl in pink cowboy boots settles for a blueberry muffin as large as her face. John returns to dancing, and the little girl laughs at him until her muffin is sufficiently heated and she and her mother return to their table for lunch.

A group of college-age women walk inside at 2:30 pm, ushering in a brisk current of outside air. They debate for a while about where to sit, and after agreeing on the one right next to the condiment bar, they begin loudly chatting. Home from Ball State University for Thanksgiving break, Sierra and her friends talk loudly and happily, occasionally sipping their pumpkin chai-tea lattes. Before Sierra went off to college, she frequented this coffee shop because of its location. The convenience outweighs the price tag associated with the coffee here, and her and her friends sit at the adjacent table for the next two hours.

The turnover in the coffee business is relatively constant, so working anywhere in caffeine longer than 6 months is a real accomplishment. Alex, an MFA student at George Mason – who dreams of writing the next great American novel – has only been working the afternoon/closing shift at De Clieu for 3 months, but has worked at other local coffee chains for more than 3 years. He loves coffee, although he wishes Intelligentsia offered more varieties of flavors, and his latte art includes a stunning repertoire of leaves, hearts, and flowers made of foam. He also truly enjoys the atmosphere that the shop provides, coming in on his off hours to get in the swing of things before his shifts. “I love working here... I think the local coffee shop is for flavor and the environment. You don’t go to Starbucks [just down the street] for the feelings – it’s just the business transaction of getting coffee.”

Even though it is only 5:30pm, the sun has already disappeared, but surprisingly, the space feels cozier than ever: the light pouring out from the windows must be encouraging passersby to come in and relax – there isn't a single unoccupied chair in the shop now. Alex's final words seem to be echoed in the clamor of chairs scraping, loud conversation, Bon Jovi's "Living on a Prayer", and computer keys clinking: "People come here because this is what people think of when they think of local coffee shops. I don't know how else to describe it, but it's what people want." A sign on the door informs patrons that De Clieu will be open from 8-12 on Thanksgiving – obviously, De Clieu is not only about its coffee, but also about its community. And it seems to be this community that keeps drawing people back here – even on a chilly Thanksgiving morning.