

Big city, small town

**A profile of how The Coffee Studio gets community and coffee just right
By Heidi Liddle**

Two parents, to say nothing of one, cannot possibly satisfy all the needs of a family-household. A community is needed as well, for raising children, and also to keep adults reasonably sane and cheerful. A community is a complex organism with complicated resources that grow gradually and organically.

- **Jane Jacobs**

I was one of the first customers that week in early December 2007, when The Coffee Studio first opened its doors a mere two blocks from our standard issue Chicago vintage six-flat apartment I then shared with my husband and 3-month old son on the northern edge of Andersonville in Chicago. My husband and I had been waiting expectantly for its arrival, as if new parents (which, in fact, we were), anxious for a place to call our own just steps away from our home. We marveled at the name, the beautiful design of space, and the exquisitely made coffee we sipped at the rustic, white oak communal table at the front of the cafe. I still remember Christy, one of the first baristas on staff, and how she knew the name of our son from the second visit on and always greeted us with a smile. Tristan, another early team member, met us at the front of the space when he saw us coming with our pre-ordered coffee, cups, creamer, sugars, etcetera, for my son's first birthday party (after we had already moved a mile away from the neighborhood). As if to prove my early patronage, a photograph, taken from outside the cafe looking in by one of the owners who I did not know at the time, captures the back of me and the head of my son, as I sat with a close friend on one of those early nights. That photograph is still used on the shop's website.

Now in those early days, we were but three of many who frequented that shop with gusto and gratitude, blessed that such a place existed quite literally in our back yard (or should I say alley, as a Chicagoan has a bit more of *that* than green space). We would often see the owners, Lee and Miguel Cano, but didn't yet know their names. After a year or two, we would nod and smile with familiarity, and in 2010, they welcomed a son (their second child, next to the café), just a

year after our own second child was born. We would see them in the neighborhood more often at that point, walking with their son, Max, and stop and chat a bit on the sidewalk after grocery shopping or getting take-out. We no longer lived right around the corner, but being only a mile further away, we still occupied much of the same space in neighborhood overlap. When my eldest started kindergarten, we enrolled him and his preschool-aged brother in a local Montessori school within walking distance of The Coffee Studio. To our delighted surprise, Lee and Miguel had enrolled Max in their preschool as well. Now, our children are in the same class at school and, along with still being regular customers, we share much more of our lives together... a relationship organically grown in our own little neighborhood oasis. I digress for a moment to say that many I know who don't live in Chicago or a similarly large metropolis often confess to being terrified of big cities — the driving, the crowds, the crime, the anonymity, you name it. What I have often told them is that what you most often find in large cities is a smaller neighborhood community that, if you're lucky, caters to just about every imaginable need. That community becomes your main street, with your hardware store, take-out Thai restaurant, grocery co-op, bookstore, library, clothing boutique, place of worship (if you so choose) and yes, your beloved coffee shop. Ten years later, I am both on the inside and the outside — still a customer, but perhaps a little more like part of the family, which is maybe exactly what makes a true community business thrive year after year.

For everything bad, there's a million really exciting things, whether it's someone puts out a really great book, there's a new movie, there's a new detective, the sky is unbelievably golden, or you have the best cup of coffee you ever had in your life.

- ***Patti Smith***

Ever since my first trip to Italy around the age of thirty, I began to approach coffee in a new way. I started to pay attention to proportionality, to the bitterness or sweetness of the bean, to the method of frothing the milk. I may not know all the correct terminology, but I did know what I liked and didn't like. I no longer wanted a big "bowl o' latté" from the adequate coffee shop across the street from my apartment in the South Loop of Chicago. I started seeking out the smaller, more craft-conscious coffee places in the city, places like Intelligentsia, who at the time was still a small roaster with only one brick-and-mortar café in the neighborhood of Lakeview. So I'm not surprised then that just a few years later The Coffee Studio would partner with Intelligentsia as their coffee supplier. It might seem that it was the obvious choice, as the roaster was expanding like wildfire throughout Chicago and beyond; however, Lee and Miguel say they chose Intelligentsia because they particularly appreciated the way they focused

on quality, their development of Direct Trade practices, and their partnerships with the coffee growers — a focus on sustainability and community that they themselves hold so dear. Ten years later, I still walk in and enjoy every cup, be it a cappuccino or a cortado, with the espresso shot pulled with care and the milk steamed just right.

Of course, in a city now flourishing with specialty coffee havens and pour-over meccas, The Coffee Studio may, at first notion, seem like just another well-appointed coffee shop. However, in 2007, in advance of a recession that would see the openings and closings of so many cafes, it was an early innovator in the high quality specialty coffee wave in Chicago, independent and neighborhood-centered. And its focus on craft and community, with the added bonus of a warm, yet modern design standing a decade's test of time, makes it quite special as more and more places angle to snag a share of the city's burgeoning coffee culture. Conceived, designed, and run by this "mom n pop" (as they refer to themselves with folksy flair) designer team, The Coffee Studio has become a beacon for Andersonville, a neighborhood with a Swedish origin that has become one of the most livable, family-friendly, remarkably progressive (as an early advocate and home to a vibrant LGBTQ community), and, dare I say, "hip" places to live in Chicago. As they tell it, Lee and Miguel had come to live in Andersonville in 2004 after stumbling upon this "European oasis" with a pedestrian main street, a unique scale, and oodles of independent businesses while on a house hunt and, upon looking at countless neighborhoods to open their new venture, could not envision anything as grand as being able to walk to work in the community they had come to call home. After finding a corner space in a part of Andersonville that was still vying for foot traffic as new businesses slowly crept northward, they set sight on a coffee shop that would hold fast to their values of well-crafted coffees and love-of-community with a minimalist and appealingly modern design aesthetic as its backdrop. It is unsurprising that the couple created a beautiful space with simple lines, natural flow, thoughtful materials, Eames chairs, and well-planned merchandising; after all, they are both graduate school-educated designers who have seen an organic connection between design and coffee: prizing truth to materials (and ingredients) and truth to integrity and authenticity.

What is magical is that The Coffee Studio has created an experience as well, understanding that the interaction with the customer also has to be real and authentic. Product alone doesn't do the trick. I once mentioned to Miguel who is responsible for the music selection — and the volume at which it is played — that this is one of the few places I have ever been in that gets the auidial ambiance right. The carefully curated list is never too loud, too jarring, too much — lending

to a background that is ideal for either concentrated work or communal conversation. And as the times change and more cafes emerge, so has the shop evolved, creating a dynamic space (with art exhibits, neighborhood chamber events, “drink-n-draw” nights); adding more menu items, seasonal drinks and house-made ice creams, and beer, wine and cocktails; and continuing to focus on house-made recipes to preserve the values they *and* their community has for ingredients of quality and integrity.

Originally, the name of the shop came, as one might expect, from Lee and Miguel’s design background. After all, a studio is where one hones a craft, just as they see themselves doing with the craft of coffee. They see many bigger coffee shops implementing automated equipment in their endeavor for uniformity, plastering “hand-crafted” jargon in an utterly loose and questionable way, and although they as well see themselves constantly working toward the goal of consistency, their motto is most certainly “consistent *but* great,” as opposed to “consistent *but* mediocre.” I once heard an artist say, “a studio space is a laboratory, not a factory,” and I believe Lee and Miguel hold to this ideal. In order to maintain their goal of being consistently great, their studio philosophy compels them to innovate their process and production to meet the demands of an ever-sophisticated coffee clientele. And of course, one won’t miss that what many understand to be a “studio” is, inherently, a community space where people gather to create, hang out, share, and work together. I myself could be accused of using The Coffee Studio as my office, and I have known writers, artists, architects, actors, and others who have written novels, sketched new designs, planned residential spaces, and practiced their lines in the confines of this creative space. This is a space that art created and where art lives.

In ten years, much has changed in the coffee culture of the city. There are many more independent specialty coffee shops and roasters around, and much more competition in Andersonville alone. The Coffee Studio continues to strive for both quality and experience, cultivating a warm approach from both the environment and the employees that few places can match. Early in this profile, I mentioned the names of a couple of the original employees, not to call them out, but rather to reveal how, even ten years later, they and their service are appreciated, as is the service I receive on a daily basis. Lee and Miguel have seen other businesses in the area close their doors and are grateful to a community that has embraced them so whole-heartedly. But this is not something they take for granted. After all, it is not easy for most small, independently owned businesses to survive, especially in the coffee and food industry. They have received great press in the past in both *Time Out* and *Bon Appetit* and know that their success

comes down to the people inside and outside the community who have visited over the years and generously given their feedback.

Ten years to the day that The Coffee Studio opened, I, along with many others in the neighborhood who had come to celebrate its anniversary, stood and reminisced in the front of the café. I listened as another customer, a new friend, told the story of how he had come to search out a new neighborhood for he and his wife (to move), upon relocating to Chicago from Nashville over a year ago. After solely wandering Andersonville and visiting The Coffee Studio, he called his wife back in Tennessee and said, “Here is where we must live.” And so, sight unseen, his wife agreed. Now, every morning, he queues up at 6:45, 15 minutes after opening, for his daily brew and off he drives to the suburbs for work, a member of that growing demographic that chooses city for home, even if an outlier from place of work. The reverse commute, they once called it; now, just “commute.” As the quote from Jane Jacobs at the beginning of this feature states, “a community is needed as well, for raising children, and also to keep adults reasonably sane and cheerful.” My husband and I are raising three children – children who have grown up going to The Coffee Studio for summer bike ride breaks, winter weekend mornings, after school treats – and I know for our family, this community is key. It certainly keeps me sane and cheerful, and not only because of the caffeine. This is the neighborhood life, and *this* studio is certainly doing it right.