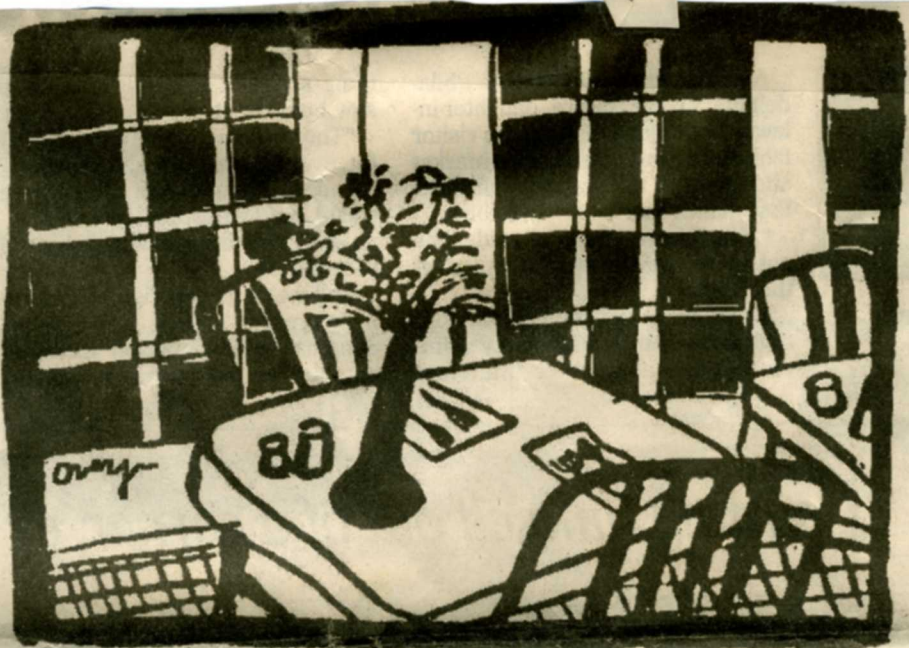


Commentary

Sidewalk cafes offer unique view of city life

Cafe dining in Philadelphia is a whole different experience. An outdoor seat is truly a window on an urban world.



By Myra Bellin

JOHN OVERMYER

It took me a while to warm to sidewalk dining in Philadelphia; our city's hustle and bustle seemed such an odd backdrop for lunch or dinner. Before the late '90s, dining al fresco meant reservations in a quiet enclosed courtyard, new-green leaves forming a natural lattice against the summer sky and candles glowing softly in the deepening twilight. But sidewalk dining introduced a different feel — tables plunked in the middle of urban life at its busiest.

"Let's see if we can grab a table outside," my husband, Ira, suggested one Friday evening when cafe tables first appeared on the sidewalks around Rittenhouse Square. "Why would you want to do that?" I asked. "Because it'll be fun," he replied. "We can sip martinis and watch everyone walking home from work."

We settled at a small, round table and I tried to adjust to the street-side ambience: impatient drivers leaning on horns, buses emitting dark smoke, and pedestrians strolling so close that one could have easily plucked the olive right out of my martini. But so many folks savored street flavors that sidewalk tables flourished; it didn't matter whether patrons could see red azaleas in bloom or a strip mall parking lot.

My neighborhood deli boasts a view of a supermarket and its loading dock; 18-wheelers maneuver wrenching right turns to reach the cargo bay, then unload and leave. But sidewalk dining in Philadelphia does not guarantee a picture-postcard view, and the deli owners put tables outside any-

air."

My family and friends offered other reasons for the city's explosion of outdoor cafes. "It's just so European, dahlings," my friend Martha postured. "And besides, food tastes better when you eat outside."

Michael, my teenage son, concluded that people like the feeling of space. "You know, Mom, sometimes when you are sitting inside a restaurant, it is just so confining that you want to get up and leave. But outside you are part of things, not cut off."

Ken, a foodie, felt differently. He could do without sidewalk dining altogether, at least in Philadelphia. "I don't get why people like it," he said. "It's too crowded and noisy. Maybe they like the scene. I guess it's like theater."



Myra Bellin

But cafes are a unique form of theater; the performers are not voluntarily on stage. So everyone within eyesight becomes part of the act, like it or not. One sunny spring Sunday several years ago I drove Michael to a bookstore for an urgently needed copy of *Twelfth Night*. A parking spot was open — a tight parking spot, but doable.

I parked, in spite of the severe stage fright that prickled my skin when I realized every turn of the wheel was

ing the car in perfectly, I earned an admiring round of applause. "Awesome, Mom," Michael whispered, looking at me with renewed respect while I took a mock bow before my fans.

With theater in mind, I began to appreciate sidewalk cafes as a whole different experience — a seat with windows on the world where I could both observe and absorb the energy of the street. Then I realized there was an added bonus: I could bring our dog.

"Why would you want to do that?" Ira asked as I called to our orange and white Brittany. We were planning to try a new restaurant with sidewalk seating that had opened nearby.

"Because it's fun," I answered. "And he's been alone all day so I'd rather not leave him again." Robin's stubby tail wagged and he leapt with excitement while I struggled to clip his leash.

Robin flashed his best puppy face at the waitress when she brought the spring rolls, sitting without being asked and lifting a paw as if to convince her that he deserved his own portion. This routine earned him a bowl of water to accompany the bread I smuggled him under the table.

Now I look forward to outdoor cafes sprouting in the spring, like colored lights in December. They're a sign of the season. They add energy and texture to "dinner out." Sometimes I even opt for brunch at a white plastic table at the neighborhood deli. Eighteen wheelers maneuvering through narrow streets are part of city life,