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The UWS Muffins Café: Being There Makes All the Difference

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The Muffins Café: No Wi-Fi for customers, but a hospitable welcome from the owners. Photos by Saul Dennis

By Saul Dennis

I've frequented The Muffins Café, on Columbus Avenue between West 70th and 71st streets, for many years. I thought I knew the place. The owners, Ali and Biba Naouai, were nice people running a friendly, refined, yet modest café. Great coffee, pastries, soups, and sandwiches, with a French flair.

Truth is, there's much more to the neighborhood's 33-year embrace of an establishment that one patron, Cheryl London, recently termed "an institution."

For instance, the Muffins Café experience is very much a reflection of the hospitality, generosity, and coffee culture central to Ali's Tunisian heritage.

Victoria Naouai, 28, recently married to Khalil Naouai, also 28 (and one of Ali and Biba's five children), describes it this way: "Hospitality is second nature in Tunisia...and The Muffins Café is very representative of the café scene there."



Khalil Naouai, helping out at the family cafe on a recent visit.

Riffing off Victoria, Khalil adds: “[T]he easy-going hospitality, it’s from the Greek and Roman heritage. You never knew which deity was going to walk in, in human form.” (The newlyweds were visiting from Montreal to help in the café. All five of Ali and Biba’s kids have at one time or another worked in the café.)

Still, this ‘Tunisian connection’ only partially explains the café’s staying power.

“The difference is Ali, the boss, being here. His presence,” says Khalil.



Ali Naouai helping a customer.

Joe, who, in addition to being a customer, cleans the café’s inviting windows, amplified the thought: “Ali’s very hands-on. I clean windows in a lot of restaurants and rarely see owners around as much as him.” (Like almost all customers the Rag spoke with, Joe declined to give his last name or have his picture taken. But don’t get the wrong idea. All were as friendly as the establishment that brings them together.)

Here’s Biba, relating a recent visit from a customer who moved out of the neighborhood but stopped in to say hi. Muffins was a special place, the woman told Biba: “I always knew I would see you and Ali here.”

I always knew I’d see you there. Being truly present — physically and emotionally. When it comes to Muffins, was this the big idea?

“People really appreciate being spoken to, somebody saying something nice in the morning,” says Ali, “This is something we’ve lost as a society. We really don’t touch, connect.”

Joe Maier, 35, new to the neighborhood and sipping a coffee at the café, says he feels the connection. “It’s a very local vibe,” he said. “You can tell people have been coming for years.”

For those who don't know the café, it's small. Just ten seats indoors, with a single bench outside. When weather and the weekend permit, a handful more seats appear on the sidewalk.



Ali and Biba.

According to Biba, “Things happen here that wouldn't happen if we were bigger. Ali just stands there and people can't help themselves, telling him their life stories.”

“Customers feel like they're part of a tribe,” Biba explained. The tribe has come to appreciate another way Muffins does things — no Wi-Fi. (More accurate: The password is not given out.)

“We're trying to offer people a break from work,” explained Julian Lasher, who started at Muffins this past November. Both he and a fellow employee, Douglas McRobb, observed, “A lack of WiFi creates an abundance of conviviality.”



Muffins employee Douglas McRobb.

Here's Cheryl London again, who's been coming to the café for 20 years. "Columbus Avenue has really changed. Everything is a chain. The charming places have vanished," she said. "The Muffins is one of the few left. This is the old Upper West Side."

A gentleman who declined to give his name shared that he's been coming to Muffins for a decade. He echoed London's sentiment: "This place feels like the Upper West Side, small and neighborly."

Raquel DeJesus has worked behind Muffins' counter for twenty years. Before that, she worked with Biba and Ali at Le Espices du Traiteur, a much-loved restaurant the couple ran for thirteen years, around the corner from Muffins.

"Customers really like that we know their orders without speaking, but also smile when they are spoken to," said DeJesus.

"For me, the best part of the job is when they take the time to ask my name."

For Victoria, the young woman who recently married into the Muffins family, the way the café operates is also part of its appeal. "It's something to behold. A certain way of moving through the space," she says, adding, "It's not just a well-oiled machine. It's a kind of an unsaid choreography."

"We're lucky to have really good employees," said Khalil, defining a good employee as, "perceptive, knowing what needs to be done at any moment."

Getting up to help a new customer, Khalil shared a parting thought. Employees at the café, he said, "need a thick skin to manage Ali's quality control, which is really at the level of a restaurant kitchen, not a small café."

Now would be natural time to mention those standards and the fare that arises from them. All are what you might expect from Ali, a chef classically trained in France.

Of course there are muffins — nine varieties, including banana chocolate chip, lemon poppy, and morning glory. But the menu extends well beyond the cafe's namesake pastry. Asked about customer favorites, Ali is pleasantly non-committal: "In the summer, salads and sandwiches. Soups, in the winter."

On the bench out front, a couple was far more demonstrative: "The cheese danish rocks," the woman said enthusiastically, adding, "You do know what rocks means, yes?"

Still, more relevant than even rocking cheese danish — at least to this reporter — is the fact that the feelings between The Muffins Café and the neighborhood are mutual, in the happy extreme.



The celebration for Theo Dixon last August.

Consider a WSR story from this past summer. [It concerns Theo Dixon](#). Known as the Mayor of the Upper West Side for over 20 years, Theo could be found at Muffins dispensing love, wisdom, and his signature slogan, Keep Love Alive.

Last August 5th, The Muffins Café and others hosted a celebration of Theo's 100th birthday. Yet another example of being present, being there. Physically and emotionally. For Theo. And the community.

No wonder another patron, a man who said he's lived on the UWS for 86 years, described Muffins as "having a nice sense of place."


Allow me to humbly add, a rather special place.

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8 COMMENTS



SAT 18 hours ago

Lovely.

Don't the owners also own Epices on 70th St?

1 Like Reply



Kathy Jaeger 4 hours ago

Reply to SAT

yes, they also own and run Epices Bakery around the corner at 104 W. 70. Just as warm and welcoming where you have to try the mocha eclairs and walnut cookies but the real secret gem at the bakery is Ali's homemade harissa! OMG!

2 Likes Reply



Dino Vercotti 2 hours ago

"You never knew which deity was going to walk in, in human form."

Every restaurant should have this mentality.

5 Likes Reply



UWS Resident 1 hour ago

LOVE Muffin Cafe and family! They make are neighborhood special! We must continue supporting businesses that give back to the community, as they have! A true example of good business! Thank you!

1 Like Reply



Jan 1 hour ago

No wi-fi? Brilliant! I wish more (most!) (all!) places would follow suit!

👍 0 ➔ Reply



Simona 57 minutes ago

My favorite place in the neighborhood. My daughter and I go there every Saturday and Sunday morning, it's our weekend routine. It is a lovely place with an amazing feeling of community. Theo is missed though.

👍 0 ➔ Reply



Leslie Rupert 35 minutes ago

I still miss their restaurant Le Espices. The food was very good, the ambiance was always warm and there was a sweet garden in the back. It had the same feeling as the cafe, always welcoming.

👍 0 ➔ Reply



Lisa 22 minutes ago

I love the place too. Such warm and welcoming people. And once you've had their fresh muffins, all other muffins elsewhere don't seem as good. I love their Morning Glories, but if it's sold out, any other kinds are yummy and awesome too. I still need to try their soups, and the thought of their avocado toast make is making me hungry. It's nice to sit on the bench outside, talk with people while eating, and observe the great vibrancy of Columbus Avenue.

👍 0 ➔ Reply

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