

The Ladies in the Cafe

By Constance Scrafield

In my wild youth, when Ernest and I lived in London, England, at one point we were residing near King's Cross, working as painters and indoor paper-hangers for the local small bread-and-breakfast hotels. The work was pretty basic, sort-of white on white, making rooms clean and exteriors simple but it kept us fed and housed and that was fine. Ours was a life without long-term plans, just living in England, just being in a place without the particular need to plan we had lots of years to live it. On reflection, It was a great time to merely enjoy such easy living.

Fairly regularly, we ate at one local cafe and they call them 'cafs,' not cafés an eatery without pretensions, owned by an Italian lady but the ladies who served the food and drink were a little heavy-set British and some of the best 'characters' in my personal memory.

Well, the clientele was mixed. It was sometimes the refuge on a cold and rainy day for the old man who hung on to a cup of tea and nursed a sandwich for as long as the owner would allow, given that seating was limited in such a small establishment and the cafe mentality quite rightly, I suppose was that the tables had to serve a goodly number of people in order for the place to survive. In due course, she would remind him of the longevity of his time with his meagre meal and encourage him to finish up.

I remember a lively argument she had with another female customer who had sat with her bowl of soup until its bloom had dulled and its warmth had chilled.

'If you want to stay on that chair, you'd better order something else,' the owner commanded the customer.

'What do you called this?' the customer demanded in sharp retort.

'I call it soup but it's been in that bowl long enough and you need to order something more if you're going to stay!' came the answer.

Funny, the little silly things we remember.

The style of the place was cafeteria with the choices served by the British ladies, whose merriment was inevitably infectious and we queued up politely every time, poking our fingers at what called to us as a meal. Amid all their chatter about what we were doing or the funny thing that had happened earlier that day, they would pile our orders on to sturdy ceramic plates and pass them over.

'Tea, dearie?' came the final offer and tea it was; no meal went without.

Ah! but the tea was poured from large, well used/loved stainless steel tea pots and this is how that tea was made. The pots' job was to keep up with demand, for we always went back for more tea. It was so good, strong and hot, the milk dashed into the cups (on saucers, mind) first and the tea was poured with such a flourish, it was wonderful.

They used tea leaves, d'you see, and I could never have used bags again after the many cups I enjoyed there. Great spoonfuls of leaves went into the freshly washed pots early in the day and never did those pots grow cold.

As the tea level in each pot lowered, a spoon of fresh tea leaves was added and boiling water was poured on top. Yet, the tea was good every cupful without any bitterness. From time to time, a pot would be emptied and re-filled with more leaves and good, boiling water. It was a ballet to watch.

They did not ask our names nor much about us, two young Canadians, not visitors it seemed but working and being part of the life

that made the cafe what it was. They knew us, of course and hurrahed when we came in, looking to order whatever the cook had decided to feed the day's patrons.

It was always good, solid nosh, with plenty of beans, eggs and chips [French fries but no one called them that]; slabs of bacon too and tomatoes coming from under the grill [broiler, that is]. The soup was hearty, peas and ham, potato leek, thick tomato; maybe chicken but with lots of real noodles, chunks of chicken and veggies.

There was pudding as well, creamy on the spoon, warm to comfort.

London was not easy. It was very big, grubby and busy. We jumped on and off the buses, paying the conductor; we walked the parks on sunny days and lived a British life for a time.

I still make my tea with leaves, which I buy in bulk at the FIG grocer on First Street, where Harmony [Whole Food Market] is. I like the Danedar red bag tea. I warm up my tea pot with boiling water, throw that out, spoon the leaves in and pour boiling water on top. Depending on my day and my tea-need, once the pot's contents are lowered, I might add another spoon of tea and less boiling water to match the pot's temperature and it is never bitter.