

Culture

By Sonya Harvey

Hookah bars were once known for expanding minds, surrounding oneself with luxury and integrating an extraordinary cultural element into everyday lives.

Today, hookah bars, located in strip malls on the edges of the city, are known as the place to go to smoke one's favorite flavored tobacco.

But spending an evening hanging out at a hookah bar is much more than just smoking flavored tobacco.

"People don't just come here to smoke shisha. This is a place to hang out, relax with friends and experience something different," Rashid Hijazi, owner of Shisha Cafe, said.

As the sun goes down, more and more people flock to lighted patios and sit around tables at their local hookah bar to relax, socialize, eat and smoke flavored tobacco.

Patrons spend the evening smoking shisha through ornate glass water pipes with multicolored hoses.

Fruity tobacco smoke, which can last for two or more hours, fills the air as newcomers try to decide which flavor they want to try.

"We don't have a hookah bar where I'm from, and it's a great place to come and play guitar and hang out with my friends," Brian DeVries, a Texas Tech college student, said.

The hypnotic trance of Middle Eastern music plays in the background on large screen televisions showing MTV-like videos with musicians singing

in Arabic.

"This cafe is a great example of a cultural exchange. You get to see a little piece of another society," Hijazi said. "This is a very peaceful, social occasion, generally filled with friendly conversation."

With bars and clubs getting noisier and more crowded, hookah bars are becoming the latest trend for the college crowd.

The alcohol-free atmosphere attracts people who don't drink or patrons 18-21 who can't frequent bars.

Most cafes stay open well after the bars close at 2 a.m., so the bar crowd can unwind after a night on the town.

The term "bar" in "Hookah bar" is, however, misleading, because in keeping with the Islamic religion, most cafes do not serve alcohol.

Smoking shisha, which started with the Turks almost 500 years ago, is a Middle Eastern cultural activity that Americans have adopted since Sept. 11 and the advent of the Iraq War.

"With all the pressure of everything going on in the world today, this is the place to come and forget about everything for awhile," Hijazi said.

Arabian nights are no longer reserved for soldiers or diplomats overseas.

One can't help but get enveloped in the rising smoke of the hookah and get transported to a whimsical land ... back to the old days, when such an activity was reserved for only the upper class and royalty.

People

By Monte Ashqar

The place was packed with all kinds of people from Saudi National Guard officers to college and high school students.

Some people were smoking shisha while others were eating and conversing. Some were even playing cards.

Whatever reason the people at the Shisha Cafe were there for, it was obvious they were relaxing and enjoying their time.

Sam Fulk, 21, who works for Builder's First Source, said, while passing the shisha hose to her friend Michelle Middleton, her friend Mark was the one who told them about this place.

Fulk said that she and Middleton come here at least twice a month to smoke and relax.

Middleton, 19, who planned to attend Northwest Vista College in the fall, said she had never tried the food, but she loves the hookah, which is another name for shisha.

Saudi National Guard 1st Lt. Majed Alshammari, 28, who is stationed at Lackland Air Force Base for a 1-year training program, said he is a daily patron of the café.

"I come here to smoke and eat along with my colleagues from work," Alshammari said,

Alshammari and three of his fellow officers were sitting outside on the patio under a big tree while watching Arabic music videos on a flat screen TV that was hanging on

the cafe's window on the inside and facing outward toward the customers.

"We love the outside patio seating with the grass and the trees, and no other place in town offers that," Capt. Saad Alqahtani, one of Alshammari's colleagues, said.

Sitting to the right of the Saudi officers were four middle-aged Arab men playing cards.

Nofan Aldmour, 51, who owns a hookah bar and restaurant in San Marcos, and yet, still comes over to Shisha Cafe to meet his friends and play cards on his free time.

"It is kind of a nice getaway from the headache of family and work sometimes," Aldmour said, grinning.

Katie Benson, a 21-year-old senior at the University of the Incarnate Word, said she started frequenting the place about eight months ago.

"I come here to enjoy the shisha with my sorority sisters," Benson said.

Marshall High School senior Sarah Reyes, 18, said she and her friends have been to other places like Sultan Cafe down the road, but they still prefer the atmosphere at Shisha Cafe.

"I found this place by accidentally driving by," Chelsea Perez said looking at the 12 faces of her friends at the table.

"We can come here and enjoy ourselves for two to three hours without doing anything illegal and just chill," Reyes said.

HOOKAH



Apples take the place of hookah bowls to add even more flavor to tobacco served at the Shisha Cafe June 6.

photos by Derik Villanueva

Music

By Jonathan Munson

Along with the tastes of Middle Eastern food and flavored tobaccos, customers at the Shisha Cafe are able to treat their ears to the sounds of the Middle East.

Before the addition of flat screens and satellite television, the indoor and outdoor establishment provided traditional Middle Eastern music to complete the atmosphere.

With a wide variety of customers — from college students playing acoustic guitars outside, to families — the Shisha Cafe is an escape from the usual restaurant and bar scene; a chance for San Antonians to experience something foreign.

"People like to see something different," owner Majeed Alobaidi said. The traditional music, involving Middle Eastern instruments such as the 'ud and the tabliah, came straight out of Alobaidi's CD collection; but since the addition of flat screen televisions, the music is provided by Dandana America's Middle Eastern satellite programming.

An example of the traditional music would be Kadhem Alsafer, Alobaidi's favorite Arabian artist. Most of the music that is played is Arabian, Alobaidi explained, but there is also some Lebanese and Kuwaiti music as well.

From the satellite, contemporary Middle Eastern music videos are similar to modern hip-hop videos; the artists are often dressed much like rappers of today, surrounded by beautiful women and expensive cars.

The music follows suit, with common beats and tunes, but the presence of Middle Eastern instruments and musical scales is hard to miss.

Like all establishments, the atmosphere is dictated by the sounds and smells — you wouldn't hear rock'n'roll in a romantic jazz lounge, just as you wouldn't hear classical music in a pool hall.

At the Shisha Cafe, with the scent of fruit-flavored tobaccos and the sounds of Arabian music, you can escape the common bar scene in San Antonio. Why not add a little culture to your life while doing so?

Smoking

By Adriana F. De Leon

Bright icicle lights, loud Middle Eastern music and people enjoying Mediterranean food along with smells of different flavored fruity tobaccos.

Shisha Cafe is a hookah bar where people can hang out with friends and smoke fruit-flavored tobacco using a water pipe.

Smoking hookah is the same as smoking tobacco: You must be 18.

Rashid Hijazi, manager of the cafe, said smoking shisha is healthier than smoking cigarettes.

Smoking cigarettes damages cells inside people's bodies resulting in lung cancer; smoking cigarettes can cause a person to become an addict and it can leave a bad odor on clothes, Hijazi said.

Smoking shisha consists of a small amount of tobacco with fruit-flavored molasses.

Hookah smoking contains a small amount of nicotine in the tobacco, which makes it safer to smoke, Hijazi said.

The shisha consolidates smoke through water which acts as a cooling filter.

There is no tar in the tobacco, and the water in the base filters out the small amount of nicotine.

Smoking shisha will not cause a person to become addicted, Hijazi said.

"It can't kill someone," Hijazi said. Business senior Gabe Murguia attends

the University of Texas at San Antonio and is a regular customer at the cafe.

Murguia does not smoke cigarettes but does smoke shisha.

"It is not addicting, and I come here to relax and hang out," Murguia said.

There are no studies that show the risks of hookah smoking are less, the same or greater than cigarettes.

So is smoking shisha safe?

"All forms of smoking is not good for you," said Dr. Victor F. German, chief of the division of community pediatrics of pulmonary diseases and professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center.

People who use cigars or a water pipe have a risk of contacting oral cancer, which can also be called mouth or tongue cancer, German said.

"This cancer can be on the gums and cheeks," he said.

Smoking cigarettes can cause lung cancer and problems with the heart.

When the lungs can no longer function, other organs in the body shut down, German said.

People enjoy smoking because the nicotine attracts a specific part in the brain that makes a person feel good.

"Nicotine is the main ingredient and makes people get a thrill," he said.

Smoking shisha may contain a small amount of nicotine in the tobacco, but there's still a risk.

Movies

By Jared Solis

A gaggle of youth gathers to sounds of Middle Eastern techno beats, dine on hummus and baba ghanouj, drink guava smoothies and smoke shisha from hookahs that permeate the air with fruity fragrances.

If this were a scene in a movie, the camera's lens would capture billows of smoke dancing from table to table on a makeshift patio with patches of green grass resembling Texas family gatherings of barbecues and birthdays only with the exotic taste of the Middle East added for flavor.

If this were a scene in a movie, it also might be rated R.

On April 10, the Motion Picture Association of America, through the Classification and Ratings Administration, which it oversees, issued a press release to the movie-making industry, stating that "now, all smoking will be considered and depictions that glamorize smoking or movies that feature pervasive smoking outside of an historic or other mitigating context may receive a higher rating."

This new provision for movie makers adds smoking to the litany of activities such as strong language, violence, drug use and nudity deemed rated R.

"Shisha smoking is about coming together and having a good time," Rashid Hijazi, owner of Shisha Cafe, 5500 Babcock Road, said. "The big difference between cigarette smoking and shisha smoking is that cigarette smokers have to have a pack everyday, while shisha smokers do it to have fun."

Hijazi may be smart to distance shisha smoking from cigarettes as the antismoking voice is growing louder in its insistence that smoking from water pipes is just as unhealthy as cigarette smoking.

According to a study on the American Cancer Society's Web site, <http://www.cancer.org>, hookah smoke may contain toxins that are not filtered out by water such as nicotine and carbon monoxide with concentrated levels that are "as high or higher than seen in cigarette smoking."

Hijazi stressed that all of his customers must be older than 18 years to smoke a hookah, and cigarette smoking is actually banned inside the cafe.

If this were a movie scene, a writer would have to omit the cigarette smoking in the scene or set the scene in an era where, historically, smoking was a socially acceptable part of everyday life to receive a rating lower than R.

A lower rating is important to studios because an R rating restricts anyone under the age of 17 from viewing without the accompaniment of an adult, preventing many possible



Ibrahim Al-Shalchi heats coals used to burn flavored tobaccos served at the Shisha Cafe, 5500 Babcock Road.

moviegoers from purchasing tickets and resulting in less profit for the studios.

The MPAA may leave itself and writers breathing room to write smoking into movies with ambiguous wording such as "outside other mitigating context," possibly deeming hookah smoking's relevance in Middle Eastern society an act not worthy of an R rating penalty but rather a depiction of cultural identity.

According to <http://www.hookahculture.com>, a Web site dedicated to promoting hookah smoking by providing resources and information relating to the activity, hookah smoking requires a certain amount of respect and etiquette.

Among the advice to novice hookah smokers, "Use the hookah with your right hand. The left is considered unclean in many countries," and "never light your cigarette from the hookah coals; it's considered very bad manners."

Hijazi's response to whether hookah smoking in movies should be penalized with an R rating was a simple, "I don't know."

But as he continued to espouse the joy of hookah smoking as part of his culture, a young American-looking man, while in the middle of a conversation on a cell phone, walks up to the fiery pit Hijazi regularly prods to heat the hookah coals, nonchalantly lights his cigarette from the embers and walks away.

Hijazi says nothing and does not seem at all bothered as he continues to poke away at the bright, glowing coals, preparing them for the next customer.

If this were a scene in a movie, this might have been a convergence of Western and Middle Eastern cultures, a depiction of American disrespect toward other cultures or just another R-rated movie.

Food

By Ryan Johnston

Outside of the Shisha Cafe, five girls sit at a circular table against the stone pillar that marks the corner of the building. The girls talk among themselves.

Jeanette Rivera, psychology junior at St. Mary's University, starts to eat as more people begin to roam the area and migrate to vacant tables, different scents of apple and kiwi fill the air and the music displayed in video form on big screen televisions get louder.

She bites into her cheese sandwich that is wrapped in silver foil and served in a wicker basket. Her sandwich consists of fresh white cheese, tomato slices, lettuce, zaa-tar (thyme) and olive oil wrapped into pita bread.

"It's different. It's made different. It tastes different. It's lighter," Katie Benson, friend of Rivera and nursing graduate of the University of Incarnate Word, said after biting into her chicken tikka kebab sandwich.

Benson, Rivera and their friends come to the cafe to eat, smoke hookah, relax and talk once every one or two weeks.

Will Evans, a prelaw sophomore at St. Philip's, sat on the patio with his friend. "The flavors are really good," he said. "We really only come for the food."

Walking into the building of the cafe, it is divided into

Flavors

By Joyce Flores

While at the Shisha Cafe, you can indulge your taste buds by enjoying the sweet taste of the flavored tobacco stuffed inside of a carved green apple.

As you inhale the sweet taste of fruit, the thought that you're smoking nicotine never crosses your mind, with 56 flavors and endless combinations.

"It's a clean, crisp, nice taste," said Christina Serna, 24, criminology senior at Texas A&M University-Kingsville System Center-San Antonio, of the double apple shisha.

The cafe offers customers 56 flavor combinations including coffee, guava, Jamaica, pomegranate and lemon rose to indulge in while using their hookahs.

A hookah is a smoking device that uses a small amount of tobacco mixed with fruit-flavored molasses.

Hookah and Shisha Central, [http://](http://www.hookah-shisha.com)

www.hookah-shisha.com, states that the hookah is the standard for smoking in the Middle East for centuries and originated in Turkey more than 500 years ago.

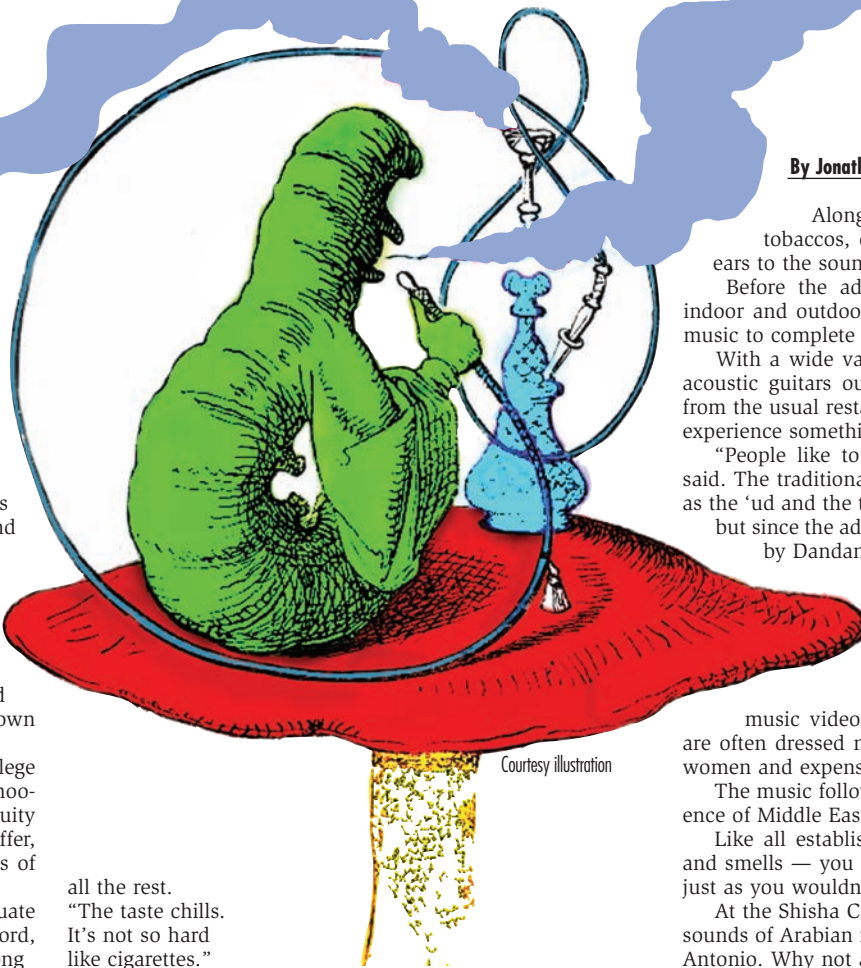
"Hubbly Bubbly smoking is quite common at restaurants and cafes all across the Middle East.

"Hookah pipes filter the flavored smoke with cool water making each puff so sweet!!"

With flavors like strawberry, kiwi, peach, mango, grape, apple, cherry, orange, melon and many more you can compile your own fruit cocktail.

Will Evans, 21, a St. Philip's College prelaw sophomore, is a regular to hookah bars. Rather than tasting the fruity flavors that a hookah bar has to offer, he prefers the more mellow flavors of jasmine or rose to calm him.

Katie Benson, 21, a recent graduate of the University of Incarnate Word, prefers the taste of blackberry among



Courtesy illustration

all the rest. "The taste chills. It's not so hard like cigarettes."