

by Derek Morrison

Coffee stop

*Energy draining
Blood sugar drop
Need sustaining.*

*But table service
Fulfillment slow
Getting nervous
Near time to go.*

*Front of house
Very chic
Back of house
News is bleak.*

*Facilities no soap
One shared towel
Shared bugs scope
Definitively foul.*

*Reassuringly expensive
Confused with quality
Customers pensive
Despite frivolity.*

*Scope for whining
Not enough to eat
Like fine dining
More they bleat.*

*Friendly smile
Not even one
Not their style*

Cyclists shun.

*Mud on seats
It's been raining
Splashes from streets
No guards explaining.*

*Pay as a group
Final pain
Collection hoop
Not come again.*

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CoffeeStop.mp3>

Commentary

The above was a rewrite of my first draft which originally started like this:

*The coffee stop is de rigueur
For the cycling kind
Who travel in a group
With sustenance in mind.*

*Now there are professional critics
Who readily offer us their opinions
But the cycling swarm of locusts
Easily challenge such dominions.*

*First, service needs to be fast
To whittle down the hoard
So taking orders at table
Will get you lowly scored etc*

My reason for writing this rhyme was a growing sense of irony and amusement. In my youth I was a hanger-on to some of the quasi mod groups whose idea of fun was to jump on their Lambretta or Vespa scooters and after a ride around town (for group posing purposes) settle on one or other cafe until the next ride (think The Who's '[Quadrophenia](#)'). Now I find myself cycling, sometimes many miles, before settling on one or other cafe until the next ride. Granted, the exercise potential is much much greater and posing is now a complete waste of time ☐

It's possible, therefore, that it's now cyclists who are the major samplers of cafes, coffee shops, bistros, tea shops (or whatever they call themselves) in a region and so are well placed to be their critics.

Many of my experiences in my part of the South West of England have actually been pretty good. I have, however, seen too many perfectly good stops for individuals or small groups transformed into really bad experiences when a "swarm of locusts" arrive. But there are others that would just be pretty awful as cycling stops whatever the circumstances.

One of the challenges facing any refreshment stop serving a potentially large group of cyclists is coping with the numbers and sustaining a fast throughput. Too often I have witnessed a cafe that is simply overwhelmed by an influx of club riders that is not necessarily solved by being forewarned and bringing in extra staff. A business space which continues to employ a management and fulfillment system set up to cope with a reasonably steady turnover of customers does not necessarily make for a good cycling club refreshment stop. Cafes which insist on full table orders, service and payment are right at the top of my avoid list. Some refreshment stops do adjust their systems for large cycling groups, e.g. by providing a reasonable fixed price self-service so that riders can fill up with coffee/tea and cake with minimal delay and then be on their way. Everyone gains from this type of thinking. But sometimes a chain outlet can be better than the smaller bistro offerings. For example, I've always found Coffee #1 to be able to sustain a fast throughput with reasonable quality and relatively fair prices.

The variation in prices between cafes can be considerable. From my perspective more expensive does not mean better. Some of the best value for money I find comes from supporting community run enterprises where the quality can equal or sometimes exceed commercial chain provision. Within day ride distance of my part of the country are such

community cafes at Chepstow, Brockweir, and Mells. Church halls and other groups may also be a good source of ad-hoc provision for club riders, e.g. Rockhampton Cricket Club in my locale.

But what has astonished me most is the common discrepancy between the presentation at the front of house and the quality of the facilities (usually at the rear). A particular demonstration of ignorance and poor hygiene is the provision of a single common hand-towel which everyone is expected to share (staff and customers). Welcome to an excellent way of ensuring whatever faecal or other pathogens are around are transmitted (disclosure: I used to teach infection control in my UK National Health Service days). The worst example of this in my region I experienced during an early summer ride last year (2014). The refreshment stop by the canal in Slimbridge, Gloucestershire had a ramshackle outhouse that passed for the toilet, had no lock, no lights, no soap and a dirty common towel. And that was being used by the staff in the nearby cafe/restaurant as well. But the same deficiency can also be found in the nicest of places. I suggest here that it's probably better you avoid the common hand towel ... but those staff cooking your food may still be using it ☐

We should, nevertheless, also consider the cafe proprietor's perspective. The sudden unannounced arrival of a large group of potentially wet or mud-splattered cyclists may not always be such a major business asset. Even with mudguards fitted it's hard to avoid splash back from wet messy roads, but the habit of riding around without mudguards in winter in the UK is simply anti-social. Great streaks of mud up someone's back is hardly conducive to the ambiance that most establishments reasonably try to maintain. It's not hard, therefore, to see why some proprietors may be less than welcoming in those circumstances.