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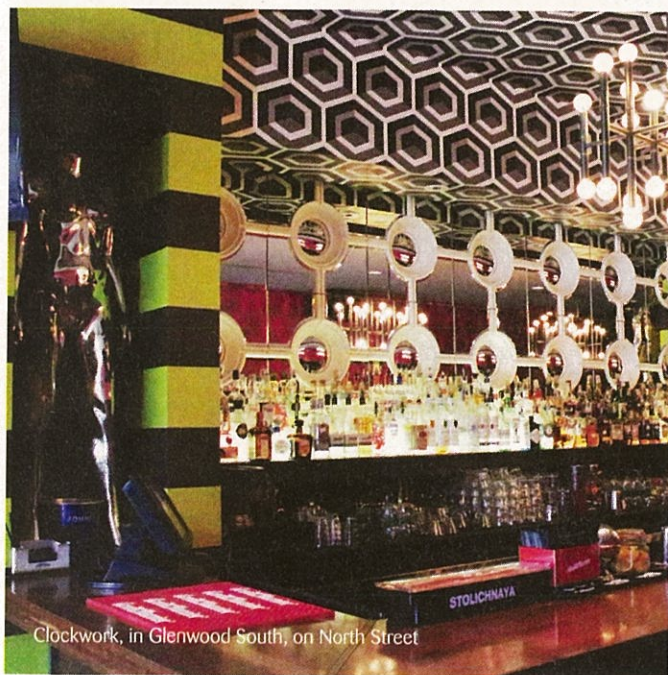


A City's Aesthetic: *The Walls of Its Watering Holes*

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHEL VACHON



Sola Coffee Café, in North Raleigh, at the corner of Lead Mine and Sawmill



Clockwork, in Glenwood South, on North Street



Vinos Finos Wine Bar, in North Raleigh, in Lafayette Village

Cup a Joe, on Hillsborough Street

PHOTO CREDITS: RACHEL VACHON





Crank Arm Brewing on Davie Street.



Dishes chattered together. The full-bodied aroma of coffee filled my nose. I hadn't taken more than two steps inside and I already felt at home. That was surprising: I hadn't felt that way much in the three months since my move from the Midwest to Raleigh. I walked to the counter to order an iced chai latte, and was greeted like I was the barista's long-time friend. Caught off guard by the welcome, I thanked him for my order and made myself comfortable in a corner booth to observe my surroundings. This was a hidden gem, I could tell. And I'd been exploring the city since the first day of my arrival.

"Sola is more than coffee," John Luther, the co-owner of Sola Coffee Café would later tell me with a smile. "It's an experience around food and drink and

community that's a big deal."

What I found that first day was exactly that: an experience. And not just one that offers entrées like fig and goat cheese toast, or craft beverages like iced caramel lattes. No. This was an experience centered around people who were known and cared about. A place where everyone was welcomed as part of the family—no matter who they were, where they came from, or what their background was. This bank-turned-café possessed something special and unique that drew me in.

When I later sat down with John and his wife Jeanne, I finally understood what made Sola different.

"When we think of Sola, Sola is not about coffee or food. It's about people," John said.

There is no doubt that people are the priority at Sola. While the couple agree

that excellent food, drink, and service are important, they also recognize that the people who visit the café come for a sense of community and belonging.

"People are made for relationship," Jeanne observed. "We're just made to be in community with one another having conversation and living life out."

Sola's decor reinforces the couple's mission, and emphasizes the welcoming nature of the Raleigh community. The soft tones of Zen green and baby blue that wrap the café in a warm embrace create a safe space for transparency. Canvas pictures hang on the wall depicting fair trade coffee growers, and framed photography from local ministries are mounted around the open-concept establishment. The heart of Sola and its tagline — "Fresh. Global. Social." — is prominently displayed right inside

the entrance above a metal artwork of the globe. The finishing touches are the various antiques placed around the room, some put there by the Luthers, and others provided by a community that wants to leave its mark.

Self-Expression

A cutout of Elvis Presley standing near old-fashioned candy dispensers flashed me a welcoming smile when I walked in. Posters of Frank Zappa stared down from yellow walls with red trim. Situated across from NC State University, the coffee shop was clearly a meeting place for students and professors alike. It was not hard to tell from looking around that the young adults in the room were boldly expressing their identities in some way, shape, or form. Staying for a while revealed a steady stream of customers coming to work, or to meet up with others over coffee or a sandwich.

"It's a very culturally diverse space," said Director of Operations Andi Macko. "You don't find all walks of life in one place, especially a social setting, that isn't forced. People are coming here because they want to come here, and they're from all different walks of life. They mix and blend, and it's good."

That's the beauty of Cup A Joe, and Raleigh, I realized. Everyone can be who they want to be and demonstrate those qualities in ways that most resonate with who they are. While the coffee shop's interior design is the result of the co-owner's interests and tastes, each person has the freedom to understand and apply their own meaning to their surroundings depending on their perspectives and background.

This is no more apparent than when faced with the mural stretching across the length of the side wall inside Cup A Joe. Composed of several scenes without distinct separations, the painting depicts haunting and raw images that speak to the human condition. Disturbing and slightly terrifying, the mural whispered dark secrets and stories of the past. With little contrast against the coffee shop walls, the mural is a chameleon, receding into the background, but standing out to confront those who choose to look closer.

Shared Experiences

It's sophisticated, yet subtle. The quiet little wine bar sat nestled into the quaint European landscape of Lafayette

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Village. How easy it was to leave the cares of everyday life behind long enough to become immersed in an atmosphere almost as mellow as a well-aged Cabernet. A floor-to-ceiling convex wall of wine and cork-covered poles added to its elegance, while welcoming customers to share yet another bottle of their favorite vintage—or even to try a new one.

Undoubtedly Vinos Finos was capable of setting an evening mood. With soft background music and colors reminiscent of its South American inspiration, this wine bar sends an invitation to people to share an experience, or to get away to oneself for a quiet moment over a glass of wine and a decadent dessert.

Sharing conversation in a social setting is an integral part of Raleigh's identity. But finding time to be alone is equally important to its residents. And what better way to do that than over a glass of chardonnay, shiraz, or rose?

"It's a lot of different things to different people," said owner Patrick West on why people come to his shop.

Whether choosing to gather, or to get away, Raleigh residents still opt to get out of the house and find their own way to wind down. And Vinos Finos gives patrons a chance to make that experience more meaningful, and memorable.

Along for the Ride

Laughter reached my ears before I even neared the brewery. I marveled at the sight of helmets and bright colored spandex. I wasn't sure what I was about to walk into. As I crossed the patio at Crank Arm Brewing, I maneuvered around bikes and groups of cyclists enjoying a cold beer on tap before heading out on a group ride. So this was the hot spot for Raleigh residents who enjoyed an active lifestyle...and a good drink.

People milled around inside, their voices bouncing off the exposed brick walls. The giant brewing tanks sat toward the back, but the front was decorated with a hodgepodge of bike parts. Gear chains were strung along the wall behind the bar and backlit with blue light. Bike frames and sprockets that had been transformed into artwork dangled on the wall.

Crank Arm Brewing, I felt, was at the hub of activity: an underscore to

the electricity and eccentricity that pulse through the veins of Raleigh's residents; unafraid to pause and enjoy the moment; unafraid to keep moving. Crank Arm's relentless energy and relatability make it a rare place where people from all walks of life come to sip a beer, ride a bike, and have a conversation for good measure.

Acknowledging the Past

The bartender tossed fresh ingredients with choice liquor into the cocktail mixer and shook the contents with panache as I stepped toward the bar. I struck up a conversation with him, and while doing so, I noticed a regal display of alcohol behind him, along the mirrored wall with two headless gold mannequins standing guard on either side. The color combinations and psychedelic patterns tying the bar all together captured my attention.

"The concept was to really be inspired by a late sixties-early seventies feel, like a place when things were simple," said Clockwork's Creative Concept Generator Souheil Alawar. "Back then we did things simply. Food was simple. It wasn't a lot of ingredients, but it was simple. And it was good. And it was fresh."

This nostalgic gathering place takes its guests back in time, while providing them with an experience that they can't get just anywhere. Their superb cuisine is made fresh and blends local and international flavors meant to delight the senses.

Clockwork's atmosphere was the very concept of retro and classy, subtlety and glamour, simplicity and sophistication. Its personality speaks to the lifeblood of Raleigh and highlights its sense of fun and carpe diem outlook.

"It shows that Raleigh in a sense is a very avant garde place," Alawar said. "We're not copying somewhere else. Hopefully they will be copying us."

Rachel Vachon is a freelance writer who recently relocated her writing career from the Midwest to North Carolina out of a spirit of adventure and search for new experiences to fuel her writing. She can be contacted about freelance writing opportunities at [linkedin.com/in/rachelvachon](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rachelvachon).

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