

## **Astoria Journal; Yes, They're Hookahs, And No, It's Tobacco**

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### **Body**

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Queens is a fragrant place, and aromas drift through its many immigrant neighborhoods -- curry in Jackson Heights, jerk chicken in Jamaica, fish sauce and roasted chestnuts in Flushing.

Take a whiff of Steinway Street in **Astoria** these days and the scent is unmistakably North African. At night, the air is filled with smoke that smells like candy, escaping through the windows and doors of the growing number of sheesha cafes, where **tobacco**, dipped in molasses, blended with apple shavings or soaked in rose oil burns in water pipes as tall as the tables.

The **tobacco**, known as sheesha, is served with fresh juices, strong teas and coffees, rice pudding, ice cream sundaes and waffles. It is carefully tended by waiters who mill about the brightly lit parlors with bits of hot charcoal that, once placed in the pipe, keep the **tobacco** burning. Alcohol is not served.

The customers, mostly men, order their **tobacco** by flavor -- regular (molasses), apple (the most popular kind), watermelon, mint, rose, grape, even cappuccino. They usually pay about \$4 for a full pipe's worth and a plastic mouthpiece to fit onto the hose of the pipe. And while they smoke, they play dominoes, chess, backgammon or cards, watch Arabic-language television on big screens, talk, debate, rest and think.

The pipe itself has many names -- among them **hookah**, nargile and hubbly bubbly -- depending on where it is smoked. In **Astoria**, where sheesha cafe proprietors are typically Egyptian, the pipe is known as a **hookah**, as it is in Cairo and Alexandria, the home cities of the entrepreneurs along Steinway Street.

It is clear from the sheesha situation in **Astoria** that the ancient **hookah**, which is believed to have first appeared centuries ago in India, carved out of coconut, is a bit of a craze. The cafes stay open as late as 5 a.m. drawing Egyptians, Algerians, Tunisians and others -- including the merely curious.

The other night around 10 p.m., a limousine driver and a social worker, Egyptian immigrants who have known each other for years and often meet for a smoke and a chess game, sat for several hours at the Egyptian Cafe, one of the newer **hookah** cafes. The driver, Ashraf Yacout, is strictly a molasses man, he said, while his friend, Ahmed Fathi, favors the apple flavor.

"**It's** like cigarettes," said Mr. Yacout, who stops at the cafe nightly on his way home. "Some like Camel, some like Marlboro."

Until their chess pieces arrived, the friends did not say much as they smoked, slowly and methodically.

While some may fill their pipes with other things in private places, illicit substances are not permitted in the sheesha cafes. (On one of the several new Web sites cropping up to tell the world about the **hookah** and to sell pipes, a fan writes of sheesha: "Remember. . . . **It's** not contraband. **It's** culture! So live a little.")

The **tobacco** is placed in the bowl of the pipe and then usually covered with a piece of aluminum foil with holes poked in it. The holes allow the sheesha to be lit by the charcoal placed on top of the foil, and the foil acts as a screen to keep ashes from mixing with the **tobacco**.

The cafes keep a supply of pipes on hand -- there are more than 50 at the Egyptian Cafe -- and grocery stores along Steinway Street sell hoses for **hookah** smokers who like to bring their own rather than use the sometimes-worn-out hoses provided by the cafes. The base of the pipe is usually made of brass or clay and holds water that bubbles as the smoke is drawn.

Since Ali El Sayed, who calls himself the godfather of the sheesha cafes in New York City, opened a **hookah** place on Steinway Street 14 years ago, five others have opened on one stretch of Steinway Street, near 25th Avenue, several of them in the last few years. Mr. Sayed, who is from Alexandria and runs a tiny but popular restaurant called the Kabab Cafe across the street from a crowded sheesha cafe, stopped selling smoke a decade ago, after deciding that **tobacco** and genuine eating do not mix, he said.

After giving a brief history of the **hookah**, Mr. Sayed, who keeps his own pipe in a corner of his restaurant and lights up whenever business dies down, explained that the sheesha experience is about communal ritual, not addiction.

Across the Arab world and beyond, sheesha has made something of a comeback in the last decade, after a long decline that began with the advent of the cigarette. People rarely smoke the pipes at home, and because of the size of the **hookah**, usually about three feet high, sheesha is not a pastime to be enjoyed on the run.

"**It's** not a lonely tool," Mr. Sayed said. "Sheesha is a social tool."

With the dinner crowd fading the other night, Mr. Sayed went to his kitchen to fetch some hot charcoal, loaded the bits into his pipe and sat down. "Let's smoke," he said.

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## Graphic

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Photo: Ashraf Yacout, at left, and his friend Ahmed Fathi smoke sheesha **tobacco** in water pipes at the Egyptian Cafe in **Astoria**, Queens. Mr. Yacout likes the molasses flavor, while his friend prefers the apple variety. (Barbara Alper for The New York Times)

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