

ALL DRESSED UP WITH NO PLACE TO SMOKE

Eugene hookah lounges wait to fire up BY LANCE SPARKS

This is how a story is born in cash-strapped journalism: Editor of mag dishes up stew of possible stories, emails same to dogsbody freelancer (DF, me), writes for groats. DF pores over list: “This food fad... that diner... hookah bar...” DF reacts: WTF?! Wazzupwidat?! Hookah? Bar? Some dude has seen the future and made it so! Email back to ed: I’m on it!

Dash out to ancient Honda, do wheelie out of driveway, slam breaks — FIRST, back inside, thrash around for baggie of dried herbal material, um, oregano maybe, somethin’ to share in communal bowl, stow in sock, but WAIT!

Race back to ‘puter, Google hookah bars. Already know hookah, right? Water pipe with multiple hoses for social puffin’ of herbal matter, often tobacco in some form, with deep history in Middle East (guys plunk down on carpet under tent that passes for Sahara shade, load bowl, drop in coal, puffemup on separate hoses, drink tea, talk smack). New versions promote “socializing in a multi-cultural setting.” (Um, apparently new versions unrelated to psychoactive herbs; empty sock, de-stash.)

Google yields about a zillion hits in a nanosecond, shows sites listing nearly 500 hookah bars/lounges in U.S., every state and D.C. — with five new opening every month — but also Canada, U.K., Spain, Netherlands, Russia. Attached stories reveal major pushback against lounges in various places. Anti-tobacco prohibitionists and health nannies are attacking hookah lounges as “unhealthy”;



for instance, Michigan has passed law that will close all hookah lounges by not renewing licenses. List on hookah-bars.com is already outdated but shows 11 lounges in Oregon, eight in Portland, one in Corvallis, one Beaverton, one Springfield (Candy Shak, 2251 Main), none in Eugene — wrong!

Eugene has jumped the craze, now has two: Mirage Hookah Lounge, at 2164 W. 7th, and Al Narah Hookah

Lounge, 1530 Willamette (previously Ratatouille). Roll the Honda, more sedately, Intrepid Reporter-style. Don IR cap, take notebook, recorder, smart phone, ready.

Mirage closed tight, no hours/days/phone listed (opens only at night — tight deadline precludes follow-up).

Al Narah is open. Inside, joint exudes cool, lavenderish walls, regular tables for two, more tables, low-lying with cushy pillows for lounging parties, dim lights, flat-screens, but no people, not a whiff of smoke. One poor guy perches behind counter, workin’ on ‘Net, knows nothing about the biz. Snoop, find list of offered tobaccos, two brands: Starbuzz offers 72 flavors, Social Smoke 77, with names like Wild Mango, Cotton Candy, Caramel Frappucino, Dragon’s Breath. Prices \$13 bowl/\$7 refill. Menu of non-alcoholic drinks, tiny list of food (Top Ramen \$1.50, Mac & Cheese \$2.50, Popcorn \$2). Hookahs for sale, \$10 for small, up to \$70 for tall and fancy). Lots of tobaccos, all the flavors, tins large and small.

Owner arrives, Shady Yasim (Shady pronounced like shad, the fish, not like shade), 25 years old, dynamic, speaks un-accented English (born in Los Angeles, Jordanian heritage). He’s pumped from long ‘chat’ with Eugene Planning and Development Department, folks prohibiting smoking within Al Narah.

Shady and his sister Lara own Al Narah in Gresham, and Shady notes, “I’ve been open two years and I’ve never had a problem or an issue at my Gresham location.” His place is not a bar; nobody gets drunk here, and the form of smoking is “socially accepted everywhere.” Shady wants to “show people that this is a great asset, does business, pays taxes” and is “a great social environment.” He adds, “It’s a culture we’re trying to bring here.” Shady flashes a letter written by neighbor Absolute Wellness Center, showing support for Al Narah.

So far, though, Al Narah Hookah Lounge is all dressed up but nobody can smoke. The *shisha*, the flavored tobaccos, smell great — in the can. Shady Yasim is trying to stay open, noting, “It’s not illegal.” But his is a story for our times. ■

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