

Political Movement Brews in Queens Café



The Jackson Heights Poetry Festival is hosted at Terraça Cafe the first Tuesday of every month.

BY SOMMER SAADI

It's 2:15 p.m. when Freddy Castiblanco sneaks in a side door at Terraça 7 Train Café in Jackson Heights and joins the meeting of the Movement for Peace in Colombia.

It's an unusually large crowd — 13 people sit in a makeshift circle on distressed wooden bar stools and a faded paisley couch. The turnout inspires Ramon Mejia, one of the movement's founders in 1999, to catalog names as each person introduces him or herself.

When the roll call reaches him, Castiblanco, 37, dressed in jeans, a black shirt and his signature thick-rimmed black glasses, keeps it brief. Everybody seems to know Freddy. A working physician in Colombia, pressured, he says, to leave Colombia's rural areas by the paramilitary commander Mancuso for practicing medicine indiscriminately to both sides of the conflict. With his father and 5-year-old son, he's now settled in New York, operating the Terraça Cafe.

In eight years, Castiblanco has transformed the once abandoned Queens storefront into a magnet for New York Colombians. A few evenings at Terraça offer an inside look to an eclectic parade of regulars—the impassioned activists and music-loving hipsters, film aficionados and budding poets, political junkies and young immigrants looking for a place that offers a taste of home.

The café, tucked away on Gleane Street, is distinctly different from the surrounding bars and cafes that line the bustling Roosevelt Avenue. Music tracks by classic Latin artists and cumbia kings play between tunes by The Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Patrons order drinks like jasmine tea and mango martinis, and surf the Internet while the beverages are being made. Terraça is a reflection of Castiblanco: warm and inviting, intriguing and diverse, and constantly adapting and evolving.

Nearly 90,000 Colombian immigrants live in New York City, according to the 2007 American Community Survey. Those who immigrated without their families find comfort in having a routine hangout like Terraça.

"The regulars that come to the bar have met and created a family here because in America they're missing one," explains bartender Marcia Garcia. She says customers come three to four times a week to spend time with people they know.

Owning a place like Terraça Café wasn't what Castiblanco envisioned when he immigrated to the city in 2000. He wanted to earn his medical license in the States, but lacked the money, he says. So instead he opened a bar.

It didn't cost much to buy the hole-in-the-wall that Castiblanco picked out, he says. Scraps of metal and wood were piled on the floor; the paint was peeling; the ceiling collapsing; and the electrical and plumbing systems needed to be replaced— all of which Castiblanco repaired himself. Plus, he received six months rent-free because his father worked as a real estate agent for the building owner.

The goal, Castiblanco says, was to create an outlet where the immigrant community in Queens, the city's most ethnically diverse borough, could share a piece of home.

"I came from a country where democracy was disrupted by an oppressive government, where human rights fighters were persecuted," Castiblanco says. "I understand the importance of building an open community."

During the Movement meeting, members discuss the details of inviting a speaker from the indigenous population in Colombia that has been forcibly removed from his home. He is one of nearly 400,000 in 2008, according to a release from the Colombian Consulate on Human Rights and Displacement in April 2009.

The meeting is adjourned at 4 p.m. — when Terraça officially opens — because, as the members note, Castiblanco still has to make money. A few linger and grab drinks. Meanwhile, Castiblanco gets out his power tools and works on a new shelving area for the expansion of Terraça's wine collection.

Recently, Castiblanco has combined his passion for medicine, politics and Terraça by representing small business owners who support an overhaul of the US health-care system. Make the Road NY, a community group that sometimes hosts events in Terraça, asked Castiblanco to join 600 other businesses in the Small Business United for Health Care coalition.

"They knew I shared the same progressive values with those small business owners so I decided to get involved," Castiblanco says.

He's not usually so overtly political. Castiblanco is not affiliated with any political party and says he doesn't plan on joining one soon, but will participate when issues directly affect him and his 11 employees.

So in June, Castiblanco testified in Congress about the importance of having the option for a group health insurance plan. He says he'll continue to push New York politicians like U.S. Rep. Joseph Crowley and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand by bombarding them with letters and phone calls until the system changes.

It's a time-consuming mission that takes Castiblanco away from Terraça quite often, but the café has started to take on a life of its own. Castiblanco says he hopes to return to medical school next September — either studying infectious diseases at New York University because they are the most prevalent in developing countries; or neuroscience and cognitive studies because then he can use the science of thought to better understand political discourse.

"I'm looking for a way to study hard and research, but without losing the possibility of affecting the community in a positive way," Castiblanco says.

On a recent Tuesday, he rushes to Terraça from a study session for his December medical school entrance exams and makes it to the Jackson Heights Poetry Festival a few minutes before it's set to begin. The small mezzanine facing the suspended stage is brimming with a selection of veteran and first-time poets, heavy-bearded, twentysomethings, and sharply dressed middle-age professionals. It's the one-year anniversary of open mike night at the cafe.

Castiblanco warmly embraces the festival director Marina Yoffe, who says she hardly sees him at the events but adores him nonetheless. He was easy to convince when she asked if the festival could be held at Terraça.

After only 30 minutes, Castiblanco has surveyed the crowd and checked in with the bartender for the night. Now he's ready to go.

Through the all-too-familiar side door, Castiblanco slips out. At nearly 8 p.m., another part of his night is just beginning. He has a meeting with a graphic designer to help create a banner for the next Movement for Peace speaker.

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