

Coffee house becomes art and discussion

By Kay McKinlay Ford

Making an exquisite cup of coffee is an art, using just the right coffee bean blends, equipment, temperature, and the perfect amount of milk. But is coffee art? Some would say so, but for others coffee surrounded by art is the ultimate way to enjoy a cup of one's favorite brew.

That is just what April Lopez envisioned when she opened Barista Coffee House two years ago at 852 N. Damen Ave. in West Town. The vivacious entrepreneur wanted a forum to combine some of her many passions: art, people, and coffee. She sought out a neighborhood place and created what she calls "my happy spot."

Although the term *barista* began as an Italian word meaning bartender, in America it has come to refer to someone with expertise in preparing coffee-based drinks. Building on a good cup of coffee, Lopez added gourmet sandwiches and salads and even cereal for the breakfast bunch. She also wanted to enhance the neighborhood's cultural diversity by surrounding patrons with a revolving art exhibition.

Participating artists and their work are a study in variety. "One month it was the graduate class from the Art Institute, and in May it's Lindsey Meyers's mixed media work," Lopez explained. "I want work that sparks conversation."

Lopez is especially interested in work by emerging artists who may not have had much opportunity to show their work. She enjoys encouraging talent and showcasing art that provokes thought. "I could have very easily bought something to put on the walls, but I wanted a place where artists could have a forum," stated Lopez.



Troy T. Heston

April Lopez's Barista Coffee House features revolving art exhibits, entertainment, and discussion groups.

She also hosts poetry and movie nights along with discussions after the performances. Several organizations have made Barista Coffee House their meeting spot, including Chicago Genealogy, PUG (an organization of photographers and graphic artists), and young mothers' groups. All enjoy the welcoming atmosphere, and students are drawn by the free wi-fi and an opportunity to choose their own music.

Not to be left out, children often find Lopez hugging them warmly as they enter. She noted many regulars have youngsters she has been watching grow up in the past few years. Even canines get a biscuit and a pat from Lopez. If she is not around, expect help from one of the eclectic employees; the community's rich demographic has allowed Lopez to staff her café with workers young and old? "always an interesting and di-

verse group," she said—to add to the flavor of the place.

Referring to her patrons, Lopez said, "I want them to feel like they are coming home, with someone asking them, 'What do you want to eat? What do you want to listen to?' so they feel like they are sitting around their home kitchen table talking all night."

Lopez started her business venture after a decade of catering sales with the Marriott Hotel in Chicago. "My job was to keep the ballroom booked and to plan social events," commented Lopez. "I just enjoy entertaining people."

The Barista Coffee House is open Monday through Friday, 6:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

ART

All Rise Gallery, 1542 N. Milwaukee Ave., presents a solo exhibit by contemporary artist Shawn