

## Visit to smoking lounge has this scribe hookah'd




**Robert Remington**

Calgary Herald

Wednesday, February 14, 2007

As soon as I heard that a judge upheld the city's smoking bylaw Tuesday, I immediately went to a local restaurant and celebrated by smoking. It was great fun. I inhaled deeply and blew big smoke rings, something I haven't done since quitting at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve in 1982.

### MORE COLUMNS BY THIS WRITER

- ∴ [Sunalta's hired gun making last stand](#) 
- ∴ [The last wild herd](#)
- ∴ [Calgary affluence propels B.C. boat biz](#) 
- ∴ [Banff sees street work as reason to party](#) 

I spent more than an hour drinking strong Turkish coffee and smoking away -- all of it legal under the city's smoking bylaw. I was at a hookah lounge, smoking a non-tobacco herbal product through a water pipe.

On Monday, the city's legal department ruled that shisha bars won't be prosecuted for serving tobacco-free smoking products, causing hookah lounge owners like Majed Abdoto breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm fine with getting rid of tobacco, but we're serving herbal products.

Most of our customers are non-smokers.

They don't even want to be around tobacco," said the amiable proprietor of Cafe Mediterranean, a block south of the Palliser Hotel on 1st Street S.W.

When the bylaw came into effect Jan. 1, Abdo said business dropped 70 per cent. Unlike a regular bar, a hookah lounge is all about smoking, not drinking. Even though he has a liquor licence, Abdo doesn't serve alcohol.

"For me, it's about religion and trying to be a better person. I ran a bar for seven years that served alcohol and had enough of it. Here, it's all very mellow. I couldn't ask for a better clientele. I never in a million years thought I would be able to run a nightclub without liquor, and here I am." If Abdo had been banned from offering tobacco-free hookah, he would have been out of business.

"We have leases to pay, mortgages, children to feed," says the 36-year-old, Calgary-born businessman, whose parents are from Lebanon.

The last and only other time I had shisha -- the aromatic product smoked in water pipes -- it was in Dubai and it didn't do much for me. I smoked an apple product that was rather harsh, probably because it contained some tobacco.

Tuesday afternoon at Cafe Mediterranean, I had a herbal, mixed fruit blend that was marvellous. There was no burning sensation, and, best of all, I didn't smell like an ashtray. Unlike a regular, smoke-filled bar, shisha lounges are sweetly aromatic, almost like walking through a Middle East spice market.

As I puffed away, I asked Abdo if there are any health risks to smoking herbal products.

"I was asked that by some of the alderman, and we couldn't find any studies," he said.

But Dr. Roger Hodkinson, an Edmonton pathologist, says there are risks to inhaling any type of smoke.

"Smoke of any type has carcinogens in it, no matter if it's herbal or not," said Hodkinson, honorary chairman of the anti-smoking lobby group Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). "Incomplete combustion of anything produces carcinogens." While it is true that there are no conclusive studies on herbal smoking risks, Hodkinson said studies on another herbal product, marijuana, have shown that it is just as carcinogenic as tobacco.

Hookah lounges escaped legal prosecution under the city's smoking bylaw because, as written, it refers only to tobacco. Next week, a motion will be brought forward by alderman at city council officially exempting shisha bars under the bylaw, something Hodkinson disagrees with.

"I'd like to see blanket coverage," he said.

As for the nice, sweet aroma that makes shisha bars palatable, even enjoyable, to anti-smoking Nazis like me, Hodkinson has a warning.

"It's the aromatic substances in it. It makes it part of the pseudo-health ambience, but it's a smokescreen," he said.

That may be, but it's a smokescreen I can handle. Considering Hodkinson's opinion, I'm going to be careful about my shisha intake, but I like the ambience, the baklava, the pita, the mango drinks and the cardamom-spiced Turkish coffee at Cafe Mediterranean.

So put that in your pipe and smoke it.

rremington@theherald.canwest.com

© The Calgary Herald 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.