

TAKE A STUDY BREAK IN COZY CACTUS CAFE

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It happens every year: The weather cools and something in me wakes up. It's strange -- I have wonky knees and hips that act up in cold, damp weather and yet, I love the cooling days, love the rough scratch of wool and long leather boots. I love bringing books into a cafe on a gray day and drinking tea and, as the afternoon wanes, some whiskey.

The Cactus Cafe is an excellent place for such an afternoon. It's small, cozy, and more inviting to a bargirl than most of the other neighborhood cafes since it has a full bar as well as tea: more than two dozen beers in bottles (from Dos Equis to Shiner), spirits and wine -- not to mention bagels and empanadas for those who like starch with their drinks. Happy hour runs from 4 to 7 p.m., with various and sundry liquor and beer specials. A mug of tea will only set you back 75 cents at all hours, however, which is great.

Most folks go to the Cactus for the intimate nighttime shows: Townes Van Zandt, Arlo Guthrie, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen and Doc Watson all played here, along with a zillion others. And the space is intimate: Thirty or so small, round, wooden tables crowd into a space only slightly larger than the average seminar classroom. Four wooden chairs with mauve backs surround each table and a few extra seats are available at the bar. The small stage can't be much longer than the average teacher's desk and red curtains draped behind the stage add warmth to the background. American Indian/Mexican rugs hang from the walls, cacti reign supreme in the windows and concert posters of musicians line the walls both outside the cafe and in it.

Yellowed globes cast dim light and the Drag is visible through the windows. The Cactus, as part of the University of Texas, is smoke-free -- and its hours are more irregular than a bar's. It closes during most school holidays (the better part of December, for example), and on the weekends it's open for shows at night (doors usually at 8); during the week it opens at 10 a.m. and closes not long after the shows.

As a grad student teacher at UT, I used to hold my office hours at the Cactus (my actual office was pretty crummy). Other folks do the same: At 11 in the morning on a Tuesday, a young blond woman is desperately trying to formulate full sentences in French while her professor (or TA?) encourages her in accented English; three tables over, student after student discusses essays with a young woman in glasses and clipped-up hair. Other folks are discussing what happened last night, what to do about psych homework, and eating lunch bought elsewhere on campus. And all this is going on while a couple of guys roll in a piano and lift it up to the stage up front and the wind blows outside.

Here's the thing about chilly gray days: I want to read. I want to write. I want to wear sweaters and drink hot whiskeys. All at the same time. Few people I know go to simply have a drink at the Cactus. They go for a show. Or, if they're on campus already, they might meet up with someone for a coffee. Certainly once my own UT days were over, I mostly stopped dropping in. But on a crisp fall day when there's work to be done and one

slow hot whiskey to be drunk, the Cactus can be a lovely place to wear your wool and rest your boots.

Cactus Cafe. Inside the Texas Union, 2247 Guadalupe St., 475-6515.