

Slumming in SoHo

We all admire SoHo for its million dollar lofts, gourmet restaurants with world-renown chefs and fresh-off-the-runway clothing boutiques. We are all impressed by the exclusive “guest-list-only” nightclubs, the many celebrity-spottings, and the luxurious spas. But let’s face it: as SoHo continues to break world records of glamour and style, prices of virtually everything have gone sky high. Pampering ourselves in the SoHo culture and cuisine that we so love has become a very costly habit.

As a long-time SoHo resident (who earns her money by the word!), I have learned how to find culture and style with out draining my wallet. There are still a few ways to bypass the prices and experience the neighborhood chic.

CULTURE

SoHo chic sprung out of the neighborhood’s artistic roots, and art can still be found in almost every spot. Aside from the 250 art galleries (which are free, but often intimidating), art is displayed in many restaurants and fashion boutiques, and naturally floods the streets of SoHo with artists displaying their work along the sidewalks of Prince and Spring streets. Even the SoHo branch of the US post office and the Mercer Medical offices have contemporary art adorning their walls.

K’avehaz (123 Mercer Street)

Nowhere else in SoHo can you get so much culture for the price of one cappuccino. This 2,500 square foot loft has a highly polished Mahogany floor, black cafe tables and conversational sofas. K’avehaz (Hungarian for coffee house) has a laid back atmosphere with dense bookshelves and changing monthly art exhibitions decorating the walls. Every night, a downtown crowd fills the cafe for drinks, a light dinner and two free live jazz performances by musicians from New York City and around the world. In addition, K’avehaz offers art exhibition openings - a free monthly party, including wine and, of course... jazz. For a schedule of art events and jazz performances, check out their amazing website at www.Kavehaz.com.

Housing Works Used Book Café (126 Crosby Street)

This is the truest independent bookstore of them all. Creaky wooden floors, a spiral wooden staircase, an old piano, cushy armchairs and miles upon miles of bookcases, overflowing with used and rare books, reaching the ceiling and lining the walls of this two floor literary oasis. The smell of old books and wood create a library feel. However, unlike a library, Housing Works sells every one of its 20,000 books and 1,000 records for the lowest prices you will find. Since 100 percent of the store’s profits benefit its parent non-profit organization assisting homeless people with AIDs, all books are donated to the store either by publishers, book reviewers or the general public and sold for bargain prices.

Housing Works Used Book Cafe hosts many literary events such as poetry reading, book parties, and panel discussions. For a schedule of upcoming events, check out there website at www.housingworksubc.com.

Void (16 Mercer Street)

Walk in through the residential building on Howard street, (you almost feel like you should buzz someone to get in), no, you don't have the wrong address, keep walking through the entrance lobby, and take a left towards the black door. When your doubts about this place are at a peak (Why am I in this deserted SoHo area that would be better named West Chinatown?), you will find yourself inside the large, dark space of Void. With the help of five mini spotlights cutting through the darkness, you will notice the part gothic, part new age interior: lounge sofas align the black walls with blackened windows, coffee tables have playing TVs inside, and a large stage-screen reigns the far left corner continuously projecting surreal images.

Every Wednesday at 8:30 PM there is a free feature film screening (recent films have been Barton Fink and Citizen Kane). On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, documentary and independent films are shown 8:00 - 10:00. Whatever the origins of the film/filmmakers might be (sometimes Columbia film students, sometimes visiting European documentarist), it is free and very "clickish" with hard-core artist and film enthusiast smoking cigarettes and making comments from the crowd. Did I mention that Void's drinks are amongst the cheapest you can find in downtown New York?

LOUNGING

Many SoHo dining establishments can hardly be called "hangouts", with reservation requirements, velvet ropes blocking the doorway, and a waitress that gives you a nasty look for ordering only a drink. Here are a few cozy places with stylish interiors that welcome those who linger.

Café Gitane (242 Mott Street)

You can sit here for hours, sampling some of the moderately priced Moroccan delights and observing the trendy scene. This is a true Nolita institution with beautiful and worldly downtown people sipping café au laits and smoking cigarettes, writing in their journals or discussing freelance art projects. If you happen to stroll in on a weekday at 11:00 or noon, you will get the impression that no one in downtown New York holds regular nine to five jobs.

Space Untitled (133 Greene Street)

This huge loft with the highest ceiling in SoHo is as industrial and minimalist as a space can be: white cast-iron columns running down the middle and white radiators spread throughout the space, some simple formica tables and gray, orange and yellow chairs dotting the wooden floor. Space Untitled is, indeed all space. Space to read in or pull out your laptop and work on your latest novel, space to have test shoots for Ford models (Ford Modeling Agency's headquarters are located across the street and they are often seen photo shooting in the café); space to have an informal staff meeting, or simply have a chat with a friend. What ever you choose to do, with company or alone, with the minimal purchase of a cappuccino, tea, smoothie or baguette sandwich, you will be left alone to do just that for as long as you want.

New York Open Center (83 Spring Street), the largest urban holistic center in the world, offers free admission to its second floor incense-laden peaceful room. There are usually a couple of people meditating in the room, and you must take off your shoes and keep silent and “mindful” if you wish to stay. But this soundproof, stress proof, carpeted, vacuum from the world will work wonders to your soul. The center, located in the hottest blocks between West SoHo and East SoHo, offers a meeting point for the larger worlds of West and East.

You would assume the Grand Bar and accompanying lounge, located on the parlor floor of the chic SoHo Grand hotel (310 West Broadway) would be off limits. But if you can resist the temptation of ordering fancy drinks or appetizers, you can indulge in one of the most glamorous SoHo scenes cost-free.

If the decor looks familiar that’s probably because it is: this chic lounge has been used as the set for so many photo shoots, that it already feels like you’ve been here many times before. But contrary to expectations, the service is laid back, and the waitress will be pleased to serve you one glass of red wine and let you linger in this second floor lounge-world as long as you want. If you and your date stick to a glass of red wine each, at your standard bar price of \$8, for the same price you might pay for a movie, you can spend a few evening hours feeling like you’re in one.

SHOPPING

This is the hardest spending temptation to resist as you walk by the chic boutique windows. The best mind frame to adapt to avoid “binge-shopping” is to view all of SoHo as a giant outdoor museum containing jewels that you can view but you cannot take home. If you feel the deep urge to shop that cannot be quenched, try these three shops that have the best of fashion and beauty products, without the price tags.

INA (101 Thompson) offers the most selective variety of resale designer clothing in New York. Prada skirts, Minola shoes and Versace dresses can all be found in this store, organized by color, in a single-size single-quantity for less than half the original retail price.

There is no trick to the shop, just a simple concept that works. INA, the owner of the store, has worked in fashion for twenty-five years and one day decided to use her Rolodex of fashion contacts to get clothes into her new retail store. Everything in the store is consigned by individuals: fashion industry people or wealthy celebrities. Some of the clothes have never been worn and still carry their retail price tag, probably leftovers from photo shoots or giveaway samples to models. Some of the clothing has been worn a few times, and then abandoned by fashion victims who felt compelled to move on to the next trend.

Whatever the mysterious history of each garment may be, the fact remains the same: the racks of INA are filled with cheaply priced second-hand haute couture clothing in great condition. The INA franchise has grown in recent years with two new Nolita locations:

21 Prince Street, and for men 262 Mott Street.

What Goes Around Comes Around (351 W. Broadway) is a classic vintage shop, with racks filled with colorful floral dresses, funky-pattern seventies shirts, and t-shirts with every slogan one can imagine. Lamps, suitcases, and other antique accessories are stacked up on shelves above the clothing racks that reach the ceiling. But most impressive is the collection of vintage leather coats (\$150-\$300), and jeans and corduroys (\$30-\$70). About half of the vintage jeans are dead stock that has been sitting in warehouses since the seventies, slightly fading from the sun, still carrying the original Levis or Lee price tag.

PAMPERING

SoHo Nails (458 West Broadway, 3rd floor)

This celeb hub manicure, pedicure, and waxing parlor is possibly SoHo's best-kept secret. At this poor man's spa, the manicure/pedicure combo is \$18, and includes personal and detailed attention to your nails, as well as a 10-minute heavenly foot massage. This unassuming third-floor bright loft has been a neighborhood institution for over ten years (although it switched locations once) and most of the clients are regulars and referred to by name, but new comers are treated with equal care. No appointment reservations are required, but they are suggested if you plan on visiting at the busier hours of lunch or late afternoon.

Perlier Kelemata: Armonie Naturali (436 West Broadway) opened this past spring and is the first US shop to carry the well-known Perlier and Kelemata Italian beauty lines. Both the Perlier and Kelemata beauty lines are sold throughout Europe (predominantly Italy and France) in drug stores and are known as a basic, inexpensive brand of beauty products. Although their first US shop is located in SoHo, and has the "SoHo chichi" feel, the prices have remained in the lower range, with some face and body treatment priced in the low teens. The Perlier line offers basket groupings of five small-sized products that cost only \$10 and make a great and "expensive looking" gift.

The HR Beauty Gallery (135 Prince Street) opened this past spring and is the only U.S. retail store to exclusively sell Helena Rubinstein products (the products are also available at Bergdorf). The large and bright retail floor resembles a gallery and offers makeup, soaps and other pampering products. Although the spa services, located on the lower level, might be outside of your budget (I know they are out of mine!), the HR Beauty gallery is new to SoHo, and therefore, offers several free products and services to increase awareness of its brand. For example, once a week Dr. Karen Burke, an award-winning dermatologist, is available for free consultation. There is no obligation to purchase any Helena Rubinstein products, but you must schedule your appointment in advance. Additionally, Beauty specialists are always available for consultation (on a walk-in basis), and they will load you with delicious free samples if you ask nicely.

FOOD

In SoHo since 1978, Ben's Pizza (177 Spring Street) is no doubt a New York classic. Hard red formica tables with connecting chairs, a loud busy counter displaying pizzas and calzones, and a hyper staff, pulling pies in and out of the stone oven and urging customers to form a straight line. You can get a slice of Pizza for \$2.00 and a medium soda for \$1.50 - making Ben's by far the cheapest lunch in SoHo. Ben's Pizza disproves the theory that celebs always look for pricy places. Regulars in this humble joint have included Meryl Streep (2-3 times a week when she lived in SoHo), Michael Douglas, Danny De Vito, Leonardo DiCaprio, Demi Moore Billy Crystal, and Madonna.

Brisa Del Caribe (489 Broadway) specializes in "Comida Latina" in the Dominican style. Black beans and yellow rice accompany every order of chicken, pork or beef. For some of these complete lunch combos you will get change back from a \$5 bill. The crowd that comes to this authentic corner kitchen restaurant is mostly Spanish-speaking and they come to eat, not to socialize. The special "chicken chunks", a delicious spiced-up Latin version of Kentucky Fried chicken served with lemon slices on top is amazing and cost \$7, including, of course, rice and beans.

Peperosso To Go (149 Sullivan Street)

This closet-size take-out or eat-in joint produces some of the freshest and tastiest Italian meals for under \$8. The menu includes salads, paninis, and made-on-the-spot pastas, all made with fresh vegetables and imported cheeses and meats. The crowd is beautiful, young and loud, and can be seen spilling over into the sidewalk, seated on the two tables outside smoking after-meal cigarettes, and even hanging out on the steps of the near-by St. Anthony's church.

Kin Khao Market (179 Prince Street), located one block from the Kin Khao restaurant, it offers take-out, special catering services, and a few tables with sauces and chopsticks for in-house eating. Although the entrees are priced similarly to other SoHo lunch-spots, the do-it-yourself options are a great deal. Choose from the bar of fresh vegetables and exotic Asian noodles, and tell the chef if you'd like it stir-fired or steamed with chicken/beef or shrimp, in a chicken broth as a soup, or moist with house dressing as a salad. (salads & soups are \$6.50/pound; dishes are \$7.50/pound).

The ultra trendy Gourmet Garage (453 Broome Street) offers beautiful food - everything from organic vegetables, cheeses, meats and seafood, to flowers, nuts, and a fully stocked in-house rotisserie. Since their coffee beans carry exotic foreign names, and their olive oils come from at least 10 different countries, you can expect that their prices will be higher than the ones at your standard grocery store. However, their prepared lunches (daily made from the same selective ingredients they carry in their store) are surprisingly cheaper than most lunch places, with soups at \$2.95, salads at \$3.95, and sandwiches starting at \$3.95. One of the best-kept neighborhood secrets is the tasting olive bar they provide in the back of the store. Tooth picks and pit bowls are provided for you to sample the international selection of olives, diverse in color, shape and spices.

