

Hookah bars, popular with teens, put on notice

Monday, May 16, 2011

BY ZACH PATBERG, Staff Writer
E-mail: patberg@northjersey.com
The Bergen Record

Teenagers across North Jersey are flocking to lounges and nightclubs to smoke water pipes, called hookahs, stuffed with fruit-laced tobacco — a fad that has spawned new businesses and set off clashes over health-code violations, underage smoking and rowdy late-night parties.

"We're finding a lot of 14-year-olds from Paramus and Ramsey coming down here to smoke," said Ralph Gambatese, Paterson's chief license inspector. "We call the parents and they're shocked to hear it. We'd rather they come to shop."

Local officials in North Jersey, who are just waking up to the trend, have revived the enforcement of a statewide indoor smoking ban to stem a surge in code violations and 3 a.m. brawls at some hookah clubs.

A lounge on lower Main Street in Hackensack closed six months ago after the city Health Department found several code violations, including indoor smoking and the sale of tobacco to underage customers. In Lyndhurst, health officials last week ordered the new Sultan Hookah to stop serving the pipes indoors, forcing the owner to close until an outdoor patio is arranged. Nine months ago, the Lyndhurst Health Department issued the hookah lounge a certificate of satisfaction.

Lyndhurst Commissioner Brian Haggerty, who oversees the Health Department, said he was unaware of how the indoor smoking ban applied to hookah lounges. "I was very upset for the owner that this had to happen — that he had to lose his business."

Once a sort of happy-hour release for Muslim men who smoke harsh tobacco for hours over sweet coffee and hands of cards, hookah smoking in public establishments has acutely changed in recent years. Its fans are far younger, diverse and multiplying as quickly as tobacco flavors — such as mango and double apple — evolve.

Grocery stores became hookah nightclubs. College campuses from New York to Denver adopted the trend. In North Jersey, lounges stretch from the Arabic and Turkish hubs in Paterson and Clifton to the suburban streets of Hackensack, Rutherford, Englewood and Lyndhurst.

Paramus native Kali Trahanas never smoked cigarettes but during high school she fell in the love with the hookah at Rutherford's Eros Cafe. She connected with the fruity flavors, the "cozy" atmosphere and the unique venue for under-21 socializing.

"It was kind of our little niche," said Trahanas, now 22. "When we were younger, we couldn't drink, so I guess it started out as something else to do."

A 2008 state Health Department survey found that 10 percent of high school students smoke tobacco from a hookah. **GASP, a statewide anti-smoking group, estimates that rate has since increased to almost 12 percent.** Health experts say hookah tobacco is no less hazardous than cigarettes.

'Bad neighbors'

Nowhere has hookah been more controversial than in Paterson, host to well-known lounges that attract young patrons from throughout North Jersey.

"They've proven to be bad neighbors in good neighborhoods," said Paterson Councilman Andre Sayeh, who targeted hookah lounges after his constituents began complaining about a couple of nightclubs several months ago. "I was not elected to look the other way."

It's nearing 9:30 on a recent Thursday night as a group of high-school-age girls in club attire, each on a cellphone, strides into Layalina Cafe. Pop and techno numbers blast through the curtained doorway into South Paterson's Main Street and a mini strobe-light rotates inside.

Near the entrance, three teenagers sit on sofas. Before them rises a shapely hookah pipe the size of a piano leg.

Outside, Dina Amar, 18, pauses to defend the smoking fashion that has exploded among young people. An Egyptian-American from North Haledon, she says she has frequented hookah cafes since she was 13. The legal age to smoke in New Jersey is 19.

"Of course we're not going to bars," she says. "We're not the ones wasted driving around."

Layalina's owner, Sam Abu, said he checks patrons' IDs at the door on weekends, but not weekdays. Asked if he has an underage smoking problem, he replied, "not really."

In the past year, Paterson police have responded to the Paradise Hookah Lounge on Main Street 61 times about criminal and quality-of-life complaints, ranging from fights with weapons and burglary to party noise and vandalism, according to police records. At least six involved suspected gang activity.

The owner, Jamal Hanash, blames his problems with police on jealous competitors and a group of drug dealers who set up in front of his club recently.

Most of the big lounges don't serve liquor, though patrons can bring their own. They charge \$12 to \$15 per hour for hookah sessions.

The newer nightclub around the corner, Lava Hookah Lounge, has drawn perhaps the loudest opposition. The large, boxy space on Montclair Avenue has become a neighborhood nuisance and provided Sayegh with a poster child for his campaign against hookah lounges.

Residents say they frequently call police over fights, screaming matches and vandalized property outside their windows. Records show that police have responded to Lava about a half-dozen times for fights, theft and an accidental hit-and-run since its August opening.

Owner Guss Adawi, a former computer engineer, admits he is new to the nightclub business and has plenty to fix. But the 29-year-old from East Rutherford wishes his neighbors would realize he's open to suggestions and not be so quick to call the police.

"If they would just call me and say, 'Hey, Guss, can you lower the music,' I'd have no problem with it," he said.

'The new chill'

This winter, the state warned Paterson to fully enforce the New Jersey Smoke-Free Air Act of 2006, which bans smoking in indoor public places. The city, in response, created a task force of inspectors that has visited two dozen hookah lounges several times in recent months. They have issued about 20 notices to cease indoor smoking as well as fines for 107 fire code violations, according to officials.

"We're getting hit pretty hard by the city right now, I'll be honest," said Moe Hammad, another Lava owner.

The lounges have made no effort to hide what they offer. The pipes adorn their signs. Lava's website offers a tutorial for hookah smoking, calling it "the new chill."

Owners claim to be making changes, however. Adawi said he now allows smoking only on an outdoor patio, though indoor hookahs were being used as recently as two weeks ago. Jamal Husain, the Arabian Cafe owner, is constructing a small porch in front of the rear garage for the summer.

Lounge operators rely on the smoking for most of their revenue, if not all. At Arabian Cafe, aside from sodas the only item sold is oatmeal-textured tobacco stuffed into grapefruit rinds and cooked under charcoal. Husain was fined \$250 recently for indoor smoking.

"If they crack down on this, that's 10 to 15 guys out of business," said Max Wasin, a 36-year-old bagel shop operator from Jordan who has made Arabian his after-work home away from home.

Hanash said he has run Paradise since 2004 with no problems. Now he is getting regular visits from health inspectors. His application for an exemption to the smoking ban has stalled repeatedly.

"My customers have been coming here for years," he said. "And now they're feeling like they're doing something illegal." This month, Hanash couldn't afford the rent because of a decline in business.

Heeding smoking ban

Eddy Hamade, who runs the Mediterranean cafe Bennies in Englewood, has abided by the indoor smoking ban, but at a cost. While the increasing number of college students coming to smoke on his outdoor patio has helped, he has never recouped the losses from ending indoor hookah sessions.

At Rutherford's Eros Cafe, owner Dimitri Valavanis said he resents lounge owners who flout the law while he complies, resulting in a loss of about a third of his revenue.

"Why should they be making money and not me?" he said, adding that Eros ignored the smoking ban for the first year until the borough threatened fines.

Some owners and customers acknowledge that stepped-up enforcement has used a broad brush to address only a few unruly establishments. Hookah venues, they point out, range from deafening clubs with security pat-downs and Ladies Night specials to a Lebanese restaurant where a man smokes as he reads a paper over lunch.

Husain, a Palestinian immigrant, used to smoke at the Community Coffee Shop in Paterson before losing his job at a paper mill. He opened Arabian Cafe a year ago.

"This is the most popular business for our people," he said.

Fast facts

In a centuries-old Middle East tradition, the shallow bowl of a tall pipe, the hookah, is filled with shisha, a foil-wrapped mixture of tobacco, honey and molasses that's heated under lighted coals. The smoker draws on a hose attached to the base; smoke descends to be cooled in a water chamber before reaching the smoker.

Many new cafes in North Jersey replace the tobacco bowl with a hollowed grapefruit half for flavor, and can charge \$12 to \$15 per person for an hour-long session.

The risks

Though some fans say it's safer than cigarettes, tobacco smoke in hookahs is no less toxic than cigarette smoke and no safer for being drawn through water, health experts say. In fact, hookah may be more hazardous because smokers take a greater volume of smoke than cigarette smokers, say experts, who also warn about infectious disease spread by sharing the pipes.

The law

New Jersey's Smoke-Free Act of 2006 prohibits smoking in indoor public places and workplaces. Establishments can apply for exemptions.