

Library Cafes: Next Logical Step

by William Pierce

Salina Public Library
Kansas

Library managers seeking national attention for their libraries might consider opening a library cafe. Innumerable library-related publications, as well as USA Today, The Chicago Tribune, and The San Francisco Chronicle have given ample coverage to the convergence of food and libraries in recent months. Who would have imagined such a simple innovation would have proven to be so newsworthy? It is the actual idea of food in libraries or, rather, the iconoclastic notion of old barriers and traditions being rebuffed that has grabbed the media's attention? For decades food has been categorically denied in the library environment. Eating in libraries was considered verboten -- as out of place as eating in church or in the classroom. But now, in the more relaxed, unencumbered age in which we live traditional library customs and practices once held sacrosanct are being re-evaluated in relation to the bottom line. And the bottom line, at least as far as public libraries are concerned, is getting more people to use the library.

Research conducted on the subject of food as a library enticement is virtually non-existent (an article written in the eighties did confirm food's rightful place in libraries when used in conjunction with children's events and special activities). Library managers contemplating challenging the historical library's status quo barring food must instead look to the management objectives used in the business world for philosophical affirmation. Profit theorists such as Peter Drucker and Tom Peters have urged staid corporations to adapt strategies based on change, flexibility, and innovation for years. Otherwise, businesses more adept at responding to the needs of society will simply step in and seize market share. In the library world a monopolistic fallacy seems to exist, especially in small-to-medium sized communities, based on the fact that there are no competing libraries: With no one vying for our customers, why not continue business as usual? The reality, of course, is that conventional public library use is being threatened by home online information delivery. As a way of meeting this challenge -- and maintaining patron market share -- it seems prudent for library managers to consider the implementation of amenities such as coffeeshops and cafes in their libraries.

Originally, only large public libraries offered food concessions for their patrons. Cafes or mini-restaurants were usually located in a designated area within the larger library complexes. This convenience was probably appreciated by patrons, but hardly necessary

since large public libraries are usually in urban areas having numerous places nearby to eat. It is the smaller, or rural, library that logically should provide food to visitors due to the probable unavailability of eating establishments in close proximity. Otherwise, patrons' library visits will be limited to between-meal timeframes: They may, or may not, return to the library after leaving for food. This may be acceptable to those libraries seeking to limit the average stay of their users, but is hardly conducive to the serious student, reader, or researcher that has designated a full day at the library to work. Americans, it seems, are conditioned to eating wherever and whenever they please in today's society. The traditional mindset forbidding food on library premises is simply unrealistic, and perhaps even somewhat draconian, in a world that caters to convenience, comfort, and consumerism.

The philosophical aversion of some library managers towards library cafes is perhaps easier to comprehend than arguments aimed at why food per se should not be allowed in the library. Can bugs be the reason for the ban in our age of toxic efficiency? Don't libraries that ban food for patrons have staff lounges or eating areas in other parts of the same building? Similarly, what library that bans food doesn't have the occasional special event in which some type of insect luring delicacy is dispensed to the staff or public? Discounting bugs, perhaps fears of spillage, food fights, or just general customer rowdiness permeate the traditionally correct librarian's persona in regard to food in the library. The Chicago Tribune poked gentle fun at this librarian stereotype in an article on library cafes last December: "Lattes in libraries? At one time, the concept would have loomed as a librarian's worst nightmare, conjuring up ghastly visions of slurping in the stacks. But not anymore." The article went on to describe the experiences of several Chicago-area libraries either already having library cafes or considering their implementation.

Two California libraries offer interesting case studies in regard to library cafes and customer compliant managerial philosophy. The new San Francisco Public Library, complete with a cafe, gallery, and music center, was recently described in the San Francisco Chronicle as aesthetically "a building to be inside of simply for the pleasure of being there." It features a garden terrace lunch area and meeting rooms for library users to gather and interact in a comfortable setting. In San Diego, where planning is underway for a new downtown library, the San Diego Union-Tribune conducted an opinion survey aimed at discerning what features and services library patrons thought the new main facility should have. In a show of support for the amenities being offered by their northern counterpart, over half of those responding approved of a library cafe, as well as meeting rooms and outdoor areas. Although these are big city libraries, serving thousands of users daily, their policy of patron accommodation seems worthy of emulation by libraries of any size or location.

At the recent ALA Conference in New York, a session dealing with library cafes focused on how public libraries can benefit from the experiences of bookstores and other retail outlets in regard to food service. The presenters recommended that most libraries should adapt a non-profit attitude in regard to food services: The amenity being offered should be a convenience for the patron, or an enticement to return. Yet, some libraries -- most notably larger, urban branches -- profit handsomely from their food service. In Los Angeles, for instance, where a cafe and large food court were inaugurated last February at the city's downtown branch, administrators decided the library cafe should be an independently

managed source of income: The LAPL Central BookEnds Cafe, run by Panda Management, is expected to earn over \$90,000 for the library annually.

The idea of having a business enterprise, profitable or not, under library auspices may be the reason some library managers are reticent to establish a library cafe. After all, many library administrators and librarians entered librarianship as an alternative to those careers contingent on consumerism. One possible solution would be to lease the management of the library cafe to a professional private sector contractor, a la Los Angeles' Bookends. Otherwise, the operation of the eatery would accrue to the library staff or volunteers. (Administrators considering a library cafe run exclusively by volunteers are advised to read Cheryl Ann McCarthy's article in the June/July 1996 issue of American Libraries on coordinating and motivating volunteers for special projects).

The library as a locus, or gathering place, where information may be obtained and exchanged in a sociable atmosphere, is a logical goal for public library managers intent on expanding their library's influence in the community and thereby thwarting the threat of library obsolescence. Library cafes may have a role in making public libraries more inviting and user friendly to visitors. To borrow a phrase from the program description of the 1996 ALA Conference session entitled "Espresso and Ambiance," library cafes "create an image that will draw customers in and make them want to come back."

"Libraries Brewing Up to Lure Readers," Chicago Tribune 10 Dec. 1995, nw 1:2.

Robert Hass, "A Poet Visits the New Main Library," San Francisco Examiner 14 April 1996, C13.

Cheryl Ann McCarthy, "Volunteers and Technology: The New Reality," American Libraries June/July 1996, 67.

ALA Conference Preview, American Libraries April 1996, 132.

This document may be circulated freely with the following statement included in its entirety:

Copyright 1997.

This article was originally published in LIBRES: Library and Information Science Electronic Journal (ISSN 1058-6768) March 31, 1997 Volume 7 Issue 1. For any commercial use, or publication (including electronic journals), you must obtain the permission of the author.

William Pierce

To subscribe to LIBRES send e-mail message to listproc@info.curtin.edu.au with the text: subscribe libres [your first name] [your last name]

Return to [Libre7n1 Contents](#)

Return to [Libres Home Page](#)

CRICOS provider code: 00301J