

Taster's choice

A&M's student body and Food Services Department favor upscale, on-campus coffee houses

By Stuart Hutson
The Battalion

With spurs clanking at every step and a Frisbee-sized belt buckle gleaming under the electric lights of Texas A&M, a student swings open the door to his favorite watering hole and moseys his way to the bar.

In a voice thick with cowboy pride and Texas twang, he orders.

"I'll take a double espresso latte with extra foam. Oh, and don't forget to sprinkle a little sugar and cinnamon on there — Ma'am."

This may not be what one expects at a university infamous for its bars fraught out of a spaghetti western and students who drink more beer than water, but these days it seems more and more Aggies would rather sip a cafe mocha while reading Shakespeare than gather in log-cabin bars with lead animals on the walls.

High-class coffee houses and delis have been popping up all over campus during the last few years as part of a Food Services Department plan to give students ample opportunity to indulge in their favorite gourmet treats while studying or chatting with friends. Students have been more than glad to take advantage of this opportunity.

"We came up with a five-year plan to increase the quality and atmosphere of dining on campus back in 1995," said Ronald Beard, director of the Food Services Department. "It has been extended for an additional three years because it has proven itself to be a popular item for all the students here."

"The idea was to provide the quality and current tastes that students find off campus in such places as Starbucks or upscale eateries and provide that on campus."

Beard said that the University instituted the changes, in part, to keep students assured that dining on campus is, indeed, fun.

"Most of the colleges around the country have mandatory meal plans, so they don't have to constantly compete for student business," he said. "But we don't do that at A&M, so we have to make sure that we provide what the students want."

One has only to walk into a cafe on campus to see the results. The cafes are constantly filled to the brim with students eager to partake in gourmet deli sandwich and Starbucks coffee while soaking up the darkened, relaxed atmosphere.

"Places like this are what a lot of students expect when they come here," Beard said. "It is the current trend, so they get used to the high-class cafes and delis at home as a place to go, relax and enjoy themselves. So, they seek it out here."

The cafes, snuggled away in the obscure corners and crevices of A&M, ex-

ist as havens for those who tire of the fluorescent and neon lights of this college town.

"I think people enjoy coming here (Rumours cafe, in the Memorial Student Center) just because it is a different atmosphere than what you find everywhere else," said Charbel Dahdah, a freshman biomedical sciences major. "It is somewhere where you can just come and relax in a quiet atmosphere perfect for studying or just hanging out."

Although these settings may make one reminiscent of the days where beatniks would snap their fingers to lines of Kerouac's poetry, those sporting cowboy attire need not be frightened.

"I don't really think that these cafes stand out too much because they are pretty much welcoming to everyone," said Stefanie Page, a freshman genetics major. "It is just as likely to see someone in here with a cowboy hat as it is to see someone with blue hair."

Beard said visitors to the campus are often surprised to see New York-style cafes in this Texas-style town.

"When somebody comes down to take a tour of campus, they are amazed to see that what they consider a dusty, old town has these kind of places," he said. "It just isn't what they expect in this part of the country."

The only disconcerting characteristics of these laid-back hide-aways are the prices, but it would seem most people do not mind shelling out the extra greenbacks for the name-brand coffee and gourmet deli sandwiches (the average sandwich costs about \$5 and a cup of joe starts at about \$3).

"It's all part of why people come here (Poor Yourk's coffee house, in Evans Library)," said Sarah Stapleton, a freshman political science major. "You can have just a sandwich and coffee anywhere, but you come here because they are better quality. It's not just a ham and cheese sandwich."

The food is not the only costly part of the cafes. Beard said he estimates that the recent additions to the campus's dining experience came with a price tag of about \$5,000 to \$6,000.

"It all came out of our reserve amount that we had built up over time; we didn't use University or tax funds," he said. "But with as well as they are going, making it up won't be a problem."

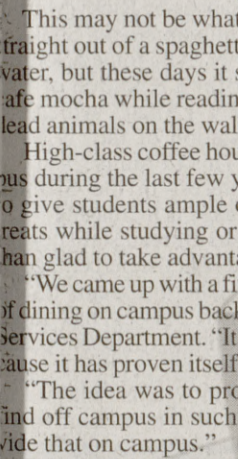
Beard said the coffee-house improvements are only the beginning. As styles and tastes change, he said, the University will try to adapt.

"We experience the same problems as the computer industry," he said. "As soon as we think we are on top of the situation, the wants and needs of our customer base change."

This attempt, however, may not apply to the boom in the sushi industry. "We tried offering it at the Twelfth Man, but most people weren't really so sure about it," he said. "But we do offer it at hors d'oeuvre gatherings and special events."

Staying on top of the times may take a lot of work, but Beard said it is worth it if it provides the students with what they want.

"Yes, maybe cowboys in coffee houses may be an odd sight to everyone else," he said. "But, this is A&M, and he's a sophisticated cowboy."



ANGELIQUE FORD/THE BATTALION

50 years + $\frac{\text{Millions of Visitors}}{\text{Growing Enrollment}}$ (700 Student Organizations) = Aging MSC

Problem: The University Center Complex received its last major expansion in 1973, when Texas A&M's enrollment was 23,000. The buildings are used heavily, furnishings show wear and tear and the "look" is dated. In addition, the cost of utilities, equipment and staff continues to rise. Free meeting rooms for organizations are tightly scheduled—100 or more meetings each night. It is time to plan ahead, to consider the best use of space and to think about expanding the facilities.

Solution: Vote FOR the Student Center Complex Fee referendum on the general election ballot Sept. 26-27. The Student Center Complex Fee is currently \$30 per semester. The referendum will increase this fee to \$40 per semester. Two dollars will pay for daily operations; the remaining \$8 will pay to refurbish public areas on the MSC's first and second floors, to provide a detailed plan to remodel the basement and to begin planning for a major expansion of the MSC.

What Do I Get From This Fee Now?

- * Free rooms for student meetings, dances and banquets
- * A nice place to lounge, take visitors and meet friends
- * Furniture and audiovisual equipment for meeting rooms
- * Cleaning, minor repairs and maintenance
- * A new roof for the University Center

Where Do I Vote? Vote at the Memorial Student Center, Evans Library, Blocker, All Faiths Chapel, Commons, Duncan or Zachry. Or use the web-based polling site at <http://www.vote.tamu.edu>.

Why? The cap on this fee is currently \$40; the referendum will tell the Texas Legislature that students support increasing the cap to \$100. Any future increase of 10% (\$4) or less could be made with approval of a student advisory board. Any increase of more than 10% would require a student body vote. The Texas Legislature meets in January 2001 and not again until 2003. If the legislature approves, students could vote to renovate the basement or to expand the University Center without going back to the legislature for approval. A yes vote will give students control of this fee.

What Will Happen To The Basement? A committee recommended remodeling underused areas to add:

- * Small meeting rooms
- * A 50-100 seat theater
- * "Cyber café" tables in a "branded" food court
- * Other amenities that more students would use

What Happens If This Vote Fails? Complete refurbishing will not happen and plans can't be made to remodel the basement or to add meeting rooms without funds in sight to pay for these items.

Vote Yes on the Student Center Complex Fee September 26-27