

# ★ GOOD EATS ★ Special Report

## Versafood- a monopoly on campus digestion

By HARRY STINSON  
When you've got a beef with anyone, who do you hate?  
When you've got a beef with anyone, who do you hit first?  
Versafood. That's who.  
The people there have a monopoly on campus that's spelled out on a one-page document. Either York or Versafood can end it in 30 days, but neither ever has.  
There are no new tenders offered despite the five percent management fee that York pays Versafood on the direct costs of food, labor and operating supplies of \$1,499,992 (last year). That means Versa got paid about \$74,999.60.  
York absorbs any losses or profits. The direct dollar incentive element is minimal. Versafood claims, cutting of costs by \$10,000 would net them only \$250 in return. York administrators maintain Versafood would

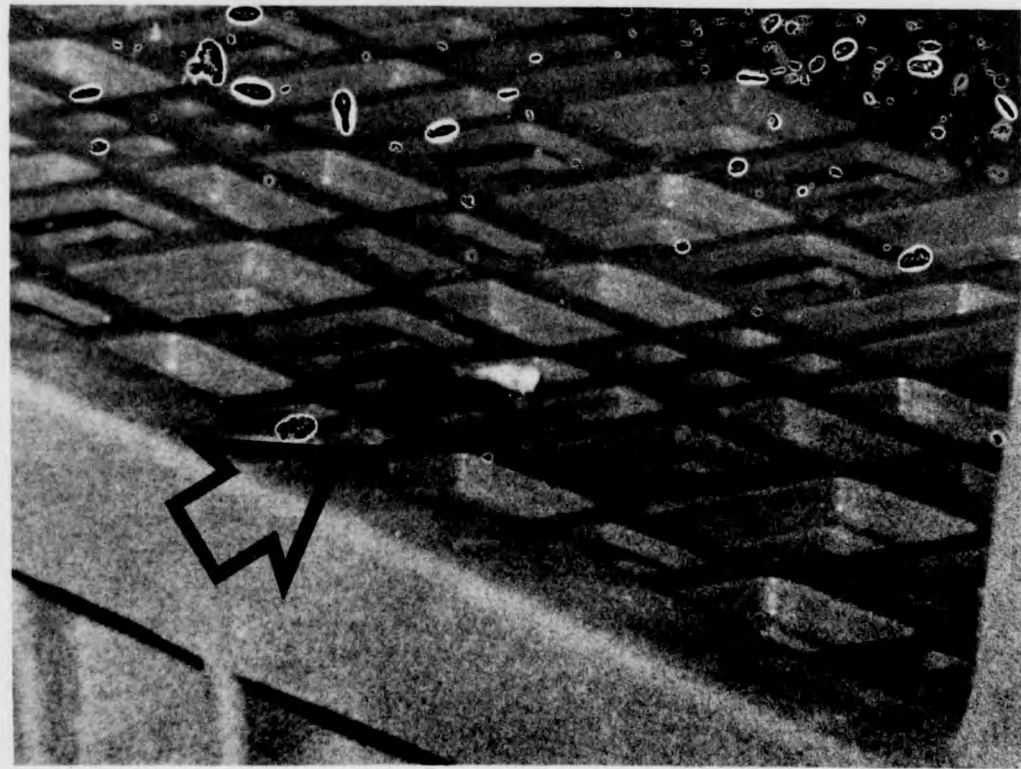


Food Services director Ed James.

jeopardize their contract if they failed to keep costs down.  
Jack Allen and Charles Kirk, the moguls of ancillary services in the Temporary Office Building, sit down each month with Versafood's monthly statement, computer data process sheets, and their own office analysis. Central Food Complex manager Rick Carson goes through the same thing each month with the student committee. They say, "that way, there is no question of validity."  
Versafood has a permanent staff of 115, with an unlimited pool of part-time help. About 50 students are on the payroll in one way or another. Students work as bartenders in the Senior Common Room, in the Submarine Sandwich operation, the Buttery, the servery, the kitchens and dish-washing rooms and at banquets and special functions.  
Although their operations are as diverse as the sandwich truck and elaborate official functions; the specialized French café and the servery, the bulk of the preparation for everything is done in Food Complex One, a massive kitchen buried in the depths beneath Founders and Vanier.

The arrangement, referred to as Central Production, entails the preparation of 2,500 sandwiches per day, salads, and one main entrée distributed York-wide, including Glendon campus to ensure "standardization of meals" and for economy. Pastries, cakes and pies are all churned out by a bakery in Stong. Rolls and sandwich breads are ordered twice daily.  
Vegetables, fried and grilled items are left up to the individual serving kitchens. According to food services director Edward James, if their inspection turns up any bad cases, they are sent back in return for a credit. Potatoes are also fresh, but vegetables.

One disturbing aspect of central distribution concerns reports that food was being trucked to Glendon on open, unsterilized trays, or simply packaged in foil, via an unrefrigerated York volkswagen van. Versafood denies this, contending that the food (pastry, baked goods, sandwiches, salads and a main entrée) is pre-chilled or flash-frozen, set on racks that have been put in the freezer overnight, and locked in cabinets. It has no opportunity to even thaw before reaching Glendon, where it is reconstituted and used that same day Versafood says.  
Menus are established two weeks in advance by a committee of college representatives. The menus are posted outside the cafeterias. Rick Carson submits the proposals of his executive chef to the group which juggles soups and entrées to compile



Bird dung on a Versafood tray?

acceptable combinations.  
Provision is made each week for that revered Versafood tradition, the Chef's Choice. Though euphemistically a meal students would otherwise not suggest, it is more properly an opportunity for the chef to put his leftovers to good use.  
The vegetables, salads and other accompanying items are prepared according to a pattern established once upon a time by a Versafood dietician. Carson claims the original entrée menu has been mangled 100 percent since the beginning of the year. Nevertheless, it is true that a balanced diet is available, should the student be very discriminating in his choice.  
The most popular items are chicken-based dishes and grilled cheese sandwiches. The biggest volume item is easily roast beef, and every Sunday noon, without fail, there is sirloin steak or reasonable facsimile thereof.  
The food for Stong's French café is more expensive and more elaborately prepared. A

separate chef is assigned to direct operations there.  
Surprisingly, there is no dietician to be found in an official capacity anywhere at York. Several years ago, a Versafood dietician put in a few months here and established a cyclical model menu. Although it still applies to the vegetables, evidence is conflicting as to whether the student-revised entrée menu is even scrutinized. Apparently no consideration has been given to attaching a dietician to the Food Services Committee. The only faltering step is an invitation to the head-office Versafood dietician to sit in on the committee meeting held yesterday.  
Complaints are not uncommon. The Versafood people, Carson and James in particular, say they prefer to receive them directly. Not only does this avoid their embarrassment at involving upper echelons, but it is easier to react informally and quickly than after several weeks delay for a com-

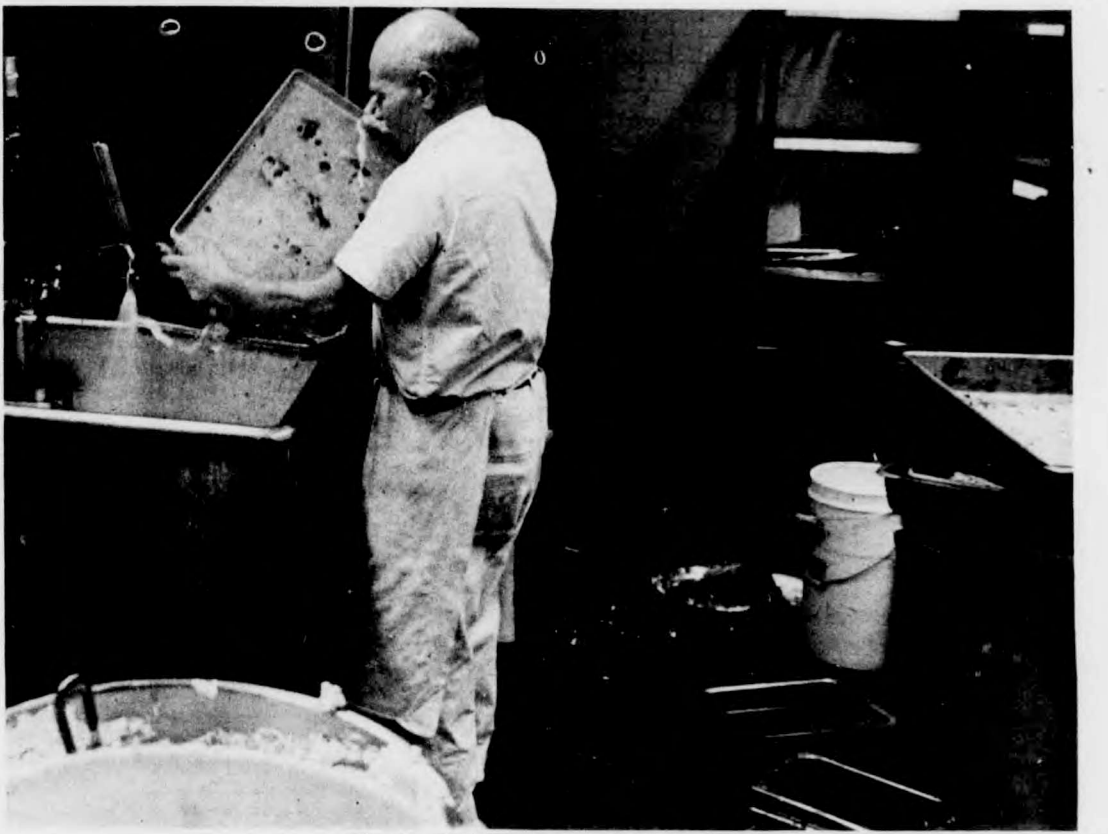
mittee meeting. Complaints are officially heard, in committee meetings, Kirk says, if they are of "sufficient priority".  
Among the more frequent gripes is the phenomenon of overcooked vegetables. This year an attempt is being made to lessen the problem by not cooking them until 5 or 10 minutes immediately before opening the cafeteria.  
Nevertheless, they either then sit and steam while the servery is open, or small batches are prepared periodically. This latter results in hideous jams and waits during the inevitable but unpredictable rushes.  
Even Versafood admits to their vegetables' underwhelming blandness. They say you can't please everybody, and it's easier for an individual to season the food himself. To this end, the Food Services Committee recently resolved to install more elaborate condiment and spice racks in the cafeterias.  
Perhaps the most serious grievance concerns the supply of fresh fruits, a necessity for students struggling desperately to balance their diets. Frequently, there is none available. As Versafood orders enough for one portion per person, they are probably justified in blaming the pocket-stuffing greed of the first few hundred to pass through the line.

Although they try and keep an eye on distribution and do in fact increase their orders to deal with temporary shortages, Versafood is reluctant to shell out much beyond their budgetary allotment. It is a pity that economy should strike home here instead of in the hidden pastry cost division or its equivalent.  
Hours of service are another common bone of contention. Carson flatly states that when he closes the servery, there are no exceptions. He has little sympathy for the protests of late breakfasters, and tardy diners. Let one in, he warns, and...  
In a potentially farther-reaching dispute, a notice posted in Stong prior to Christmas announced three more days of non-service. As the original contract had included those days, the students forced the issue by demanding to be served with Versafood. Perhaps dumbfounded by this turn of events, the staff complied.  
While Carson prefers to handle complaints directly, the Food Service Committee provides gives him an opportunity to find out

what's happening and to discuss the solutions to such problems as the theft of meal cards and cutlery. The disappearance of one complete place setting per student (100 dozen sets) every six weeks, is not only annoying to him, but directly affects everyone else, as the total cost of replacing these items must be absorbed directly by University Food Services. This in part contributes to the scheduled \$100 fee hike for 1972-73 academic year.  
For years the Buttery servery has swirled in good intentions and equal amounts of garbage. Blessed with a courtyard useless in the months that students are actually on campus, and with a naturally sterile setting, it is now losing traffic and money. Funds have already been spent to change the drapes to a brighter color over the Campus Planning Committee's garbled cries of horror that orange was incompatible with University decor. An improved speaker set-up will also be installed.  
Kirk has plans for \$3,000 more worth of improvements, and professes to be open to suggestions. However there are no plans for a similar informal watering hole in either College Complex Two or in the new Calumet building.  
The most concrete and telling challenge to the Versafood monopoly comes in the area of party catering. Although Fred Liepold, Versafood's special events man, discounts the idea of widespread defiance, ancillary services is more worried. They claim that Versafood "carries a very necessary function in the community and should be used fully", and that their service is the most completely available.  
They say their Special Functions menu is totally flexible, highly appealing and reasonably priced. They are already operating at a minimum profit, they insist, and the University community has an obligation to spend the taxpayer's money right here, on campus.  
All the same, at least a dozen groups, among them large faculties, have habitually violated the monopoly. This agreement is described by one involved faculty member as "restricting the freedom of the academic community to socialize." He said the people involved intend to continue violating the monopoly.  
The rebels consistently cite exorbitant prices as a major factor in their boycott. Food services concedes that Versa prices may be slightly higher, but re-emphasize their comprehensive service. They also contend that since it is York money, funds shouldn't be diverted forever off campus simply to save a department some money. Versafood's 35 percent liquor mark-up, which includes the cost of bartender, set-up and clean-up, has driven groups to apply for their own liquor licences.  
They claim that for a period York forces an interference at the Liquor Licence Board and confiscated permits. Consequently, some groups don't even bother to try and obtain a licence. They hold their functions illegally, and thus jeopardize all liquor license applications coming from the university.  
Some of the dissidents flatly denounce the quality, prices, and selection of Versafood's catering division. They question Versafood's moral right to dictate caterers. Others frankly agree York could well use the revenue from the large catering trade. But they don't feel Versafood is doing a satisfactory job in the area or range of service. They cite good, quickly obtainable meals for small meetings, a faculty dining room, general food quality, as examples, and will continue to flaunt Versafood and ancillary services until they feel people become aware of what's happening. Furthermore, they want Versafood to come to them and ask what they should do to win back their patronage.  
It is their position that right now the tendency is for Versafood to rationalize things as they are instead of undertaking a serious re-examination of campus food services.  
McMaster, the story goes, was dissatisfied with their caterer, so they gave the old gang the pink slip, and brought in a different whiz-bang group. The new company immediately began to offer a high-quality menu that pleased all the diners no end.  
Working on a cost-plus arrangement with McMaster, they soon ran up a \$250,000 debt. Before six months of the second year of the contract, they too were out on their ear. McMaster tried doing their own catering on a straight-cash basis. With no guaranteed income, they again lost money.  
The moral of the story, says Charles Kirk, is it's a complex business. True, but an inadequate excuse for the current situation.



About an hour or so before a meal, Versafood loads a truck up with buckets of food and trucks it to Glendon. It makes nice warmed-over lunch from the friends at York.



The buckets and pans get washed.

### Student takes Versa complaint to federal government

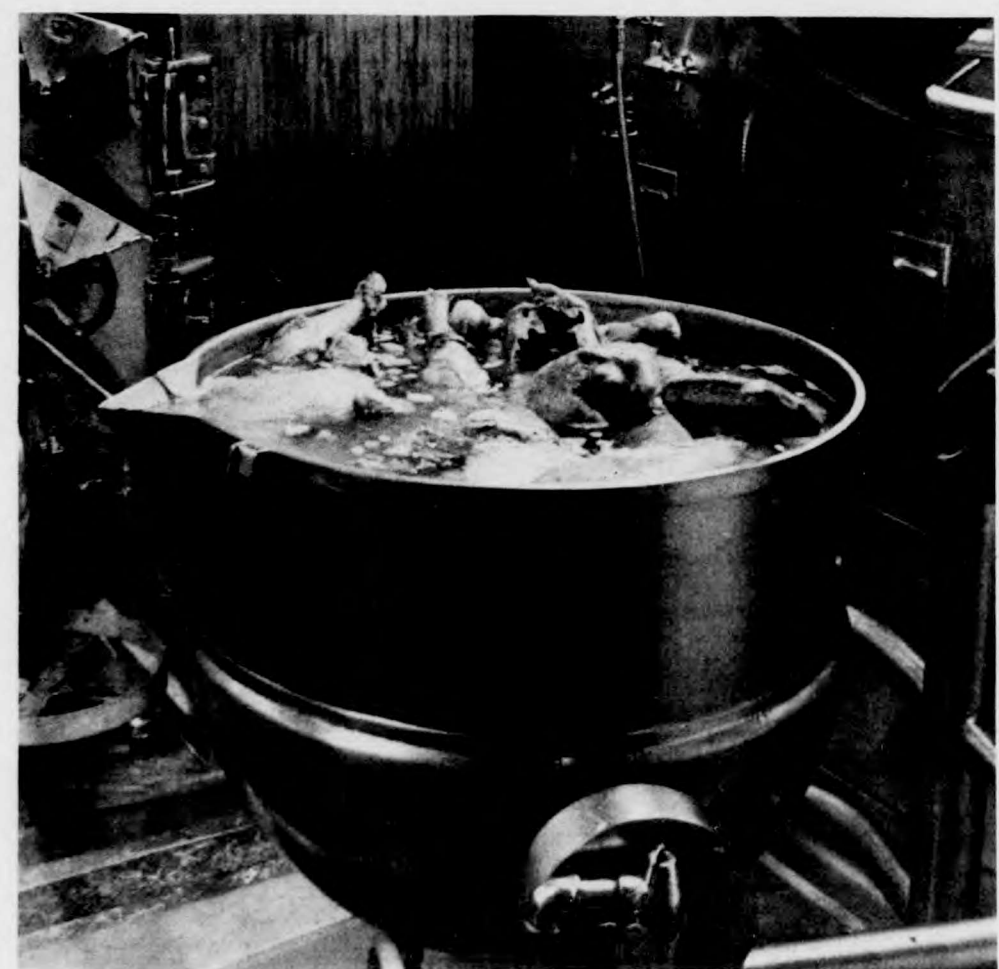
At least one York student had the incentive to go beyond the Food Services Committee with her complaint about Versafood. She had her federal MP petition York on her behalf blaming Versa food meals for her perpetual illness.  
No one knows if the MP accepted the offer of a sample Versafood meal with after-dinner tests to detect any Versa side-effects.  
For the most part, Versafood employees get the brunt of the verbally made complaints about Versafood. Food Services employs a part-time troubleshooter by the name of Ernie McCabe, a York student, deputized to ferret out and research complaints (Ernie, where are you?).  
Student representatives from each college, Versafood director Ed James, Complex One manager Rich Carson and various York associations make up the committee. Charles Kirk of ancillary services is committee chairman. The committee and its sub-committee off-shoots handle menu planning, complaints and quality control, and finances.  
Ultimate administrative decisions rest with business operations head Jack Allen and Kirk. When Versafood feels that costs, wages, and other factors necessitate a price rise, they go to ancillary services. Allen and Kirk authorized the hike in the meal plan rates. The 21-meal deal jumped from \$435 to \$525, 73 cents to 81 cents on an average meal. Recently, a 13 percent caterers' wage hike made Versafood ask a price hike in sandwiches. According to Kirk, this would have been averted by the institution of the 15 cent cup of coffee. The boycott favored support for the cheaper York beverage.  
Allen and Kirk keep a close watch on Versafood's books, regularly reviewing and comparing. For 1971-72, ancillary services forecast a surplus of \$17,000. Kirk estimates this will become a small loss, but explains this discrepancy by alluding to other budgets adjusted to reflect cost changes after their prediction was made.



Jack Allen

Students on the food committee feel the committee is primarily a divisionary tactic and harbor no illusions that Versafood won't continue to prepare food the most economical way known to mankind. But, they say, borderline quality control has at least been enforced, specifically with regard to soup, sandwiches, vegetables and menu.  
Everyone agrees the committee's prime function is to receive complaints and make recommendations, although no one is bound to follow through.  
Attendance at meetings is sparse. One student member points to a singular lack of communication, citing unclear and infrequent meeting dates, late minutes, and the depressing knowledge that the committee is just a glorified sounding board, with no real power.  
Despite all the professed willingness and facility for complaints to be submitted, the actual treatment of the matter is a different matter. "We're pretty careful about distribution around here," Kirk hedged. Copies of follow-ups on complaints, when justified, are limited, he said.

Photos by Lerrick Starr and David Leach



Chicken soup being prepared in the main kitchen.

### Choose your food wisely says Wheeler

York students who attribute their health problems to a Versafood diet may have nobody to blame but themselves, says Dr. Jim Wheeler from the Student Clinic in Vanier residence.  
Any cases of malnutrition on campus, he says, are due to students selecting the wrong food items.  
Wheeler made these comments after analysing a sample Versafood weekly menu to ascertain its nutritional value. Assuming the preparation to be of adequate quality, that overcooking did not occur regularly and the food itself was of acceptable standards, he found the menu a good, balanced selection.  
Wheeler did note a tendency toward too many starches particularly among the lunch choices.  
He qualified his remarks by emphasizing the need for students to supplement their basic meals with the milk, fruits, juices, salads, and vegetables available. Otherwise, Versafood's bill of fare provided quite good variety, he said.  
Students come to Wheeler at the clinic and complain of fatigue, depression and listlessness, and volunteer that their symptoms are due to the poor quality of Versafood's wares. The doctor feels that this rationalization is only a crutch. Malnutrition, he warns, is rarely detectable on its own, except in cases of starvation.  
The major health problem at York is more insidious and stems from an underlying student ignorance about nutrition and healthy style of life.  
An average York resident student will either skip breakfast or grab an item such as a roll or donut and coffee; the first two high in starches, the latter devoid of nutritional value and potentially addictive. If he has any semblance of a full breakfast at all, he is likely to shun the egg and meat offered in favour of the french toast or pancakes, both with syrup and butter, and both available every day.

At lunch time, aided by a starch-oriented selection to begin with, he will again steer for the chicken a la King, the spaghetti, the chili or the rice. Most will choose a sandwich, again with a roll and or donut and coffee. Dinner offers the most hope, although here again Wheeler fears the tendency will be toward the starches.  
The danger of such high-carbohydrate diets are two-fold: the neglect of proteins and the low satiating (hunger satisfying) effect of carbohydrates. Within a few hours, a rebound effect sets in and the impulse is to start munching again. Proteins, on the other hand, satiate the brain, and leave a more lasting full feeling.  
Proteins, Wheeler emphasizes, are the most important foods. He advises York eaters to go for the more natural, uncooked foods,

salads, tomatoes, lettuce, fruits (such as oranges and apples in particular), and protein staples such as meat, fish, eggs, fowl, liver and cheese.  
A related problem is that not only do students eat what they want and not what they should actually have, but on the whole, they are an inactive bunch. Wheeler refers to them as hot-house people, spending too much time indoors, sitting in lectures and coffee shops. Given all these factors, he cautions, is to be malnourished, gain weight, and fall out of condition, and one need not be overweight to be out of condition either.  
For most students, he says the comparatively sedentary York existence represents a dramatic change of pace from high school activity. As a result, their basic metabolic rate, (the number of calories used per day) decreases. The consequence is most often overweight, but as the body now requires less hemoglobin, there is the possibility of becoming anemic.  
Thus, Wheeler explains, students eating what they regard as normal meals soon are suffering from overnutrition. The symptoms are all too common: overweight, tired, no drive, mental fatigue, difficulty in getting up, listless, constipated, being puffed-out easily. Most seriously, students then pick up and can't shake off colds, gripes, sore throats and other minor illnesses. Less fit people have a lower host resistance, he asserts, and will take longer to get back into good health. These are the people who come to him for antibiotics.  
Looking around the campus, Wheeler is unconvinced that the York student is unable to afford good food. The problem is not so much with Versafood, he asserts, but with the inactive marshmallows that comprise the student body. More proteins, fresh fruits and salads, more discretion in choosing meals, and considerably more activity are solutions. There may be deficiencies in the York Food Service, but why compound them?



Dr. Jim Wheeler