

The Lunch (and Breakfast) Bunch

It's almost 2 p.m., and a steady stream of employees picks out lunches, snacks and drinks in the DFAIT cafeteria at 125 Sussex. Their sandwiches, date squares and juices will provide much-needed energy for the afternoon's work. But the friendly, fast and fun service they find among the dedicated Sodexo staff here is equally refreshing.

These are people with familiar faces and pleasant attitudes, quickly looking after those of us who work in or pass through the building.

There's short-order cook Roger Tassé, a 16-year cafeteria veteran, who makes the grill come alive with fried-egg sandwiches, burgers and BLTs—usually all at once, and always with a smile.

"Only a few customers have seen me in a bad mood, and today they're retired," says Tassé, who learned to cook for his family as a teenager, when both of his parents worked. He enjoys an easy camaraderie with his customers, many of whom arrive at his short-order stand "irritated by their work" and leave relaxed. "I'm kind of like a bartender—people talk to me, especially at fiscal year-end."

At the far end of the line, cashiers Suzanne Proulx and Madeleine Dupont are always ready for the rush.

"I prefer being busy—otherwise it's boring," says Proulx, who's worked the middle stand for a dozen years and calls the customers "regulars," watching as

those who are rotational come and go on postings. One woman recently brought the two cashiers pretty brooches from Asia.

Dupont, on the far left, came to DFAIT eight years ago, after cafeteria jobs at Nortel and the RCMP. She became a cashier after selling her own paint and wallpaper store, and turned down office jobs because "there were no people there."

Dupont's spirited repartee with customers makes her a favourite. In a rapid-fire but gentle voice, like an auctioneer's patter or a sportscaster's play-by-play, she calls out what items people are holding, then the cash they proffer, then the change she hands back. "Monsieur is having an egg salad sandwich?" she begins. "We're having an egg salad sandwich," she seems to instruct the cash register as she enters the order. "That will be \$3.57... \$3.57 from 10 dollars," she continues, withdrawing the change from the cash drawer and counting it aloud with a final, "Thank you; have a good lunch and a good afternoon."

Calling everything out makes transactions go faster when there's a queue, otherwise people hesitate, she confides. "They wait until I tell them what they're having."

Dupont works until the cafeteria closes at 4 p.m., and then cashes out. It's a long day—she arrives at 7 a.m. But she doesn't start on her cash until 8 a.m., generously volunteering that first hour to make what she calls "healthies"—the parfait cups of fruit, yoghurt and cottage cheese that the cafeteria sells.

"I like the customers to have their stuff," she explains as a pregnant woman comes to the cash with one of the parfaits. "She's having a baby, so I want her to eat healthy food," Dupont adds as she rings up the purchase. "Madame is having a healthy. That'll be \$2.99, that's \$2.99, \$2.99 from five dollars," she intones, then counts out the change. "Thank you, Madame—and have a good snack."



From left to right: Madeleine Dupont, Roger Tassé and Suzanne Proulx - photo: Michel Pixel/DFAIT

From Club Sandwiches to Pho

Tastes have changed in the DFAIT cafeteria over time. Madeleine Dupont says diners today have more choices, like the "innovation" menu of pho, stir fry and risotto, as well as a long list of "fancy" sandwiches. "It's more fun," she says. Roger Tassé once "built" 80 club sandwiches a day—even making 30 of them in 30 minutes, his all-time record—but today he'll serve perhaps 20 of them over the entire lunch period. Tassé, who has invented dishes such as breakfast sandwiches and grill specials over the years, says cafeteria cuisine remains a balance. "People are going more for healthier things," he says, "but they're always going to come back for a little grease once in a while."