

How others see us

Globe reporter tracks down rhubarb bugs

The headline ran, "The gut issue at York U: eaters fed up with food."

Aha. The reporter who had spent two days sifting through our back copies had handed in his article on York's food situation.

What we didn't expect was top billing — after a fashion. But for those of you who missed it, the following article appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on Wednesday, March 26, and is reprinted with their permission.

The article is intact, except for the last quarter, in which reporter Martin O'Malley indulged in a long dialogue between a student and administrator modelled on the Socratic manner. It was considered rather silly, and has been deleted. (A copy of the full article can be perused in the *Excalibur* office.)

By MARTIN O'MALLEY

The catering manager was talking on the telephone with a company executive.

"They were in the flour and just got baked," he said, then listened. "Yes, in our rhubarb pie."

What prompted the call was a photograph in *Excalibur*, York University's student newspaper. On the front page (March 6) was a rhubarb pie from which nine bugs had been plucked and assembled like chromosomes in a pool of pie-goo.

Someone had clipped it and tacked it to a notice board in Oakville.

"That was my boss's boss," the catering manager explained.

It was another shot in the latest war of student unrest, this time a war that is reassuring in its return to old verities. From the apathy of Campus '75, a gut issue: bad food, students in the clutches of a monopolistic caterer. Where are the Trots and Maoist when you need them?

York University's 25,000 eaters (students, faculty, staff) have been grumbling about tasteless meals and

lacklustre service since classes resumed in September. *Excalibur* runs a food story and/or editorial every second issue. Now, bugs in the rhubarb pie.

The problem is exacerbated because of York's awful isolation in the barrens northwest of Toronto. The only caterer on campus is VS Services Ltd., and when the winds blow cold, it is a long hike to any reasonable off-campus restaurant.

The kick in the teeth is for York's 1,500 resident students. Day students can bring their lunches in a bag or use cash for food at a few student-run shops, but resident students have no choice. At registration they sign up for a compulsory meal plan and are given \$460 worth of "scrip" that can only be used at the caterer's cash registers.

Any scrip left over at April 30 can't be refunded. With about a month to go, resident students are selling surplus scrip for 20, 30, and 50 per cent off. Scalpers buy low and sell high.

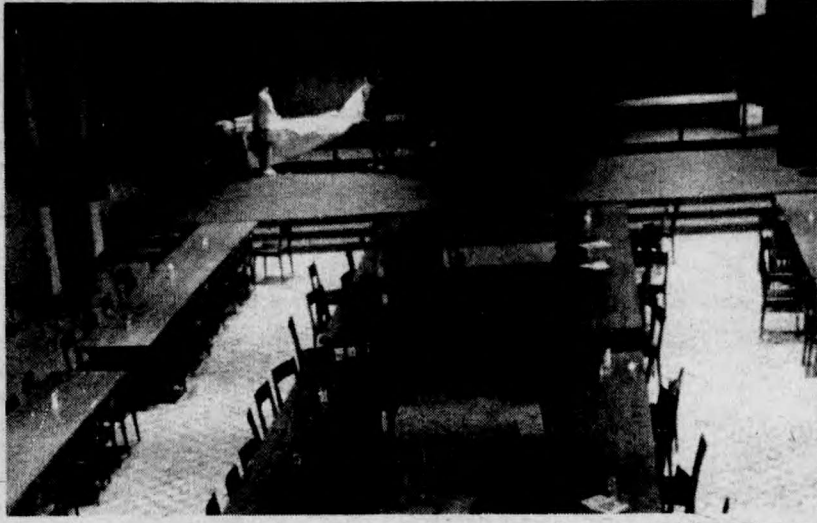
It is the damndest foofaraw. Students say they are being ripped off by the university. The university says it is being ripped off by the students. The caterer says it is being unfairly maligned, that there is hardly a caterer on any campus not under attack because institutional food invariably is less palatable than momma's.

As for the rhubarb pie, Chris Tillson, the catering manager at York, shrugs it off as an occupational hazard.

"We handled 218,000 customers through the cash registers last month," he said. "We buy seven tons of groceries a week. So we get a bad pie?"

(Tillson told *Excalibur* he definitely had not shrugged it off as an occupational hazard, and that "I would hardly have stayed in the business as long as I have if I behaved like that." — ed.)

Excalibur took great delight reporting findings of a consultant hired last fall to study VS Services' opera-



Lerrick Starr photo

tion. It wasn't an entirely negative report, but you'd never know from excerpts printed in *Excalibur*: counter refrigerators were "dirty", bake tables were "extremely dirty", and some cooking equipment "had never been cleaned".

It also noted: "It would appear that the catering company has been using the university as a training ground for management personnel, to the detriment of the university."

Steps have been taken to improve the situation. Tenders will determine who caters at York in 1975-76. As many as seven, but probably four, caterers will set up shop on campus and, it is hoped, the virtues of free enterprise will keep students contentedly fed.

Chinese, Italian and assorted ethnic delicatessens, perhaps even a McDonald's franchise, may be allowed in.

"It's unprecedented," said Norman Crandles, director of York's ancillary services. "It will be a radical change."

That does not mean students will be satisfied. Meal costs probably will

increase (unless competing caterers launch a price war). Resident students will be able to spend their "scrip" on more than one caterer, and thus exercise freedom of choice, but they still will have to contend with a scrip system.

Why? Crandles said the scrip system was started two years ago to correct abuses by students. The old system entitled resident students to a meal card and they could subscribe to three plans: \$375 for 10 meals a week, \$465 for 14 meals a week, and \$495 for 19 meals a week. At each meal the student could have unlimited seconds.

It resulted in resident students feeding day students with their leftovers. Trays of pies, cakes, and uneaten entrées were thrown down the garbage chute after every meal. The meal card system was impossible to enforce, because students could report cards lost and get new ones for a token fee of \$3. The lost cards would turn up elsewhere.

The university had a food services deficit of \$227,000 in 1972-73, the highest yearly deficit in its history.

(The accumulated food services deficit at York is \$760,000). Crandles was brought in and he started the scrip system.

In 1973-74, there were four scrip plans. Residents could buy \$420, \$510, \$570 or \$650 worth of scrip. There were bonuses: if you paid \$510, you got \$20 worth of extra scrip, for \$570 you got \$590, and for \$650 you got \$690.

This resulted in a situation in which students who bought the largest amount had scrip left over at April 30. Refunds were granted to about 100 hardship cases. In 1974-75, the scrip system was changed to only one plan: a flat \$460 worth of scrip.

Over an eight-month academic year, this meant students were allotted \$2 a day for breakfast, lunch, and supper, seven days a week. The university figured this would eliminate the problem of unused scrip.

Because scrip is good only at eateries serviced by the caterer, it was reasoned that if resident students bought all their meals with scrip, they'd start running out of scrip by about March.

"Where can anyone live for \$2 a day for eight months?" asked Crandles. "Surplus scrip is a myth."

Not so. Some resident students pay cash for submarine sandwiches and pop at student-run shops. Some trek to off-campus restaurants for a break.

Others simply are modest eaters. (Crandles refers to "jock students" and "fine arts students" to illustrate appetite extremes.) Many resident students go home on weekends.

As a result, there are resident students with up to \$200 worth of unspent scrip...

• The *Globe and Mail*, Toronto.

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