

CATERING ON CAMPUS:

DANIEL PILLAR INVESTIGATES THE NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF ON-CAMPUS CATERING

Sitting outside the Science Library in the minutes before an interview with Guild President Tom Antoniazzi, I checked the Facebook page 'UWA Lecturer Quotes' for responses to a question I'd posed one week earlier. I'd asked what students thought about Guild catering and the responses varied from mentions of a lack of allergen-friendly foods, to the ever-increasing calls for franchises, and of course the common complaints about coffee quality. Yet while I read these posts with great interest, the café around me was unquestionably packed and many walkers-by were carrying the Guild brown coffee cups.

To be honest, I wasn't sure what to expect from my discussion with Tom, but after hearing he was a nice guy, I sought a meeting at an ex-Pelican-editor's recommendation. I wanted to seek a response to the criticisms people often level at the Guild for holding a monopoly on campus catering. The discussion began with Tom providing me some background on the catering situation.

Essentially, the Guild own and run all food outlets on campus and completely finance all operations and staff employed. Prices are set annually by the Guild Council, representatives chosen by the students in Guild elections. The cafés' last

year contributed approximately \$150k to the Guild's \$2m budget, which funds clubs, societies and support services on campus.

The Guild, and therefore the students of UWA, has control of catering, which Tom described as an almost unique position in a modern campus (and one to be proud of). "The suggestion that the Guild is exploiting students by jacking up prices is a bit of a paradox," he said on that topic. "The Guild exists to serve the interests of students, so all benefits we derive from catering flow back to important student services. And we have the ability to tailor to what students are asking for."

In response to the Facebook question that I posted, people were suggesting that the food was expensive and bad quality. Some even thought that by allowing in private enterprises, or even franchises, we'd get a better catering system. Posts online referred to other campuses where food is cheaper and better quality from privatised systems. I asked Tom: Is there a reason why the Guild hasn't adopted a similar strategy?

"Firstly, I agree that on some campuses, outsourcing can work," Tom replied. "But UWA is unique in that we have one of the strongest student Guilds still around (with more Facebook likes than any other in Australia). We want to keep student control of student affairs." That control, he elaborated, "allows us to make

changes like introducing some options for students for special needs and allows us to sell coffee at \$1.70, which is a business decision no franchise on campus would likely make.

"I believe it's a perception problem. We benchmark our prices and quality against other campuses, and by those results we're actually doing quite well. In reality, our food isn't expensive. It's a simple fact," said Tom. Comparing on-campus prices to those nearby, I found that prices were roughly similar. Check the outset for more details.

You may have read various blogs about catering at UWA, or suggestions of bringing Rocket Fuel or similar franchises on campus and charging them rent to pay the difference. Tom noted that if it was at the other end of the spectrum, we might have difficulty enticing private operators to open at financially unviable times – such as to 8pm at business to cater for postgrads, or during exam and holiday periods of little or erratic attendance. Ultimately, any profit they turn wouldn't be put back in to student support.

Our conversation then turned to the Eat and Drink survey, which the Guild commissioned to take an overall response of student opinions (in a more formal setting than online comments). For those of a market research background, you'll be glad to know the responses were evenly distributed according to the campus population. "Interestingly, of the 1800 responses, the response was overwhelmingly that people were overall somewhat satisfied," said Tom. "In the official survey, not many people actually brought up the notion of externalising catering control." I was given access to the executive summary of the survey, which states that only 1.5% of respondents made any comments to the effect of deregulating catering.

Tom continued by saying that "the survey is a great way to analyse feedback and we will certainly take what's mentioned into account. Facebook, on the other hand, does tend to bring out negative comments." It seems that while people are happy to complain on the internet, they didn't do so to the same extent on the official survey. However,

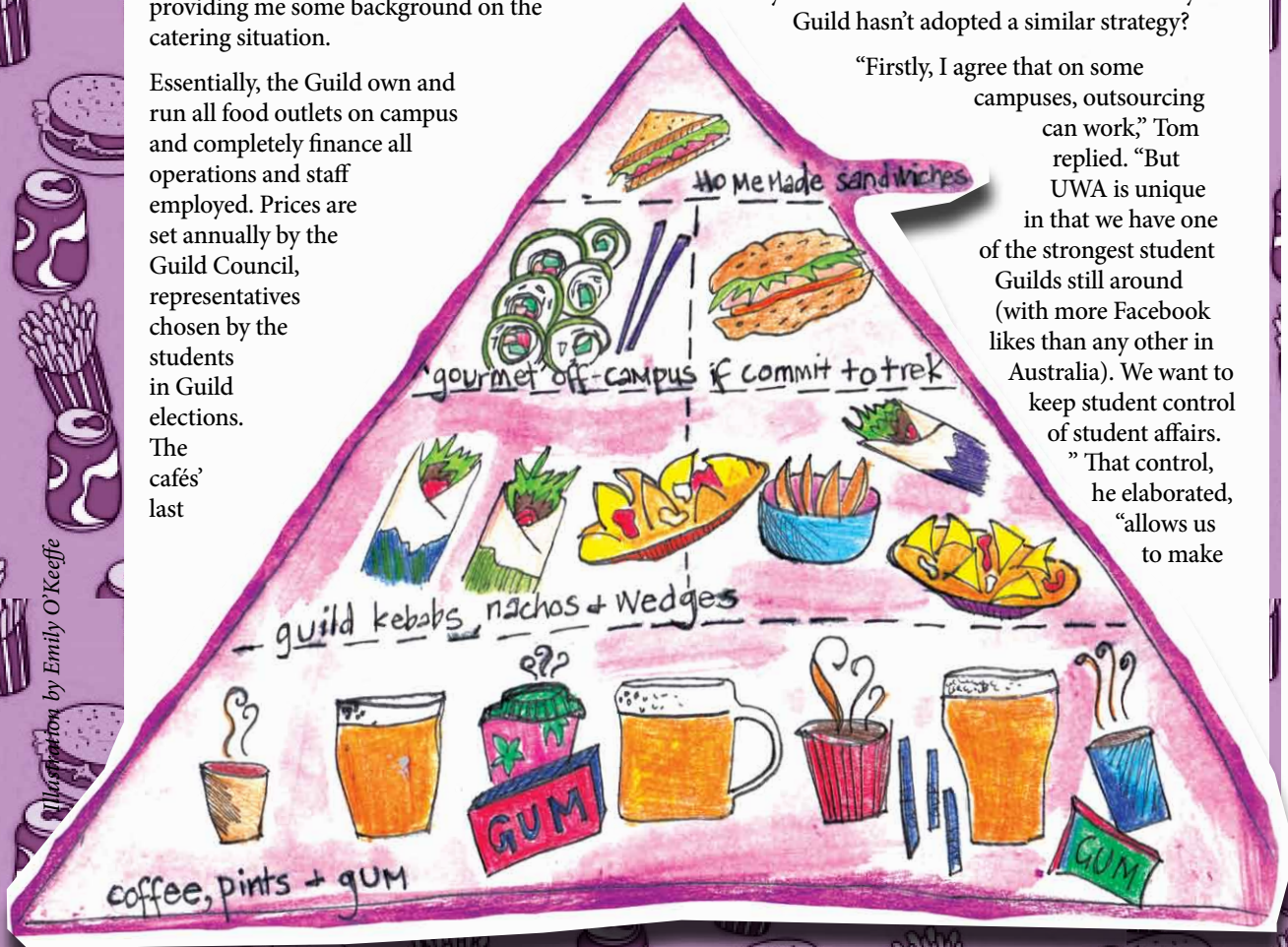


Illustration by Emily O'Keefe

in order to make changes, formal feedback from students is the key.

“Based on past student consultation, we designed the Science café’s menu to use organic ingredients, at great cost to the Guild. In its first year, it barely broke even. This year it’s doing better, despite a 10–20% increase in cost of goods that we had to absorb. And as you can see, students seem to like the fact it’s different to other outlets. We’re doing the same thing in the business school with the ready-to-order menu, and differentiating the outlets [as we get funds to renovate or build new cafes] is a trend that we want to continue,” he said. “If the Guild wasn’t in control of catering, no surveys like this would be possible.”

If we were to open franchises of chains like Subway or Aroma Café on campus, we would be restricted to the policies of that chain. Obviously, that’s no issue to someone who always wants the same meatball sub, but it brings up the issues of not catering to the needs of certain groups on campus.

For example, if followed strictly, Halal food preparation regulations would stipulate that food could not be prepared in the same area in which foods containing bacon are prepared. While the Guild is able to take these regulations into consideration when looking at new meal options, franchise regulations often state that all of the standard menu must be available, at a stipulated price. Of course being a part of a franchise means access to mass-produced menu options and possibly reduced costs – it obviously takes control out of the hands of students. The kitchen out the back of the Ref currently prepares most fresh food, which is distributed to the outlets on campus. This both improves quality and improves the economy of preparation every day.

Following my meeting with Tom, I was welcomed to the Ref to meet Ken Saverimutto, Director of Guild Catering for the past four years, and Rodney Taylor, the Operations Manager. We sat down with fresh flat whites to continue the catering discussion and began with the topic of coffee.

“So how does it taste?” asked Ken. After taking the first sip, I was happy to report that it was quite enjoyable. “We know we’re not perfect,” said Ken. “But we do our best to ensure quality. Our baristas are all trained and supervised. In fact, as part of an inter-campus competition, one of our baristas is currently in the Gold Coast representing the Guild at a championship!”

It’s nice to hear the Guild’s side of the story, but I’ll admit that I have certainly had some disappointing coffees on campus in the past. I have a distinct memory of one cold winter morning, when I was rushing to an 8am Stats lecture, flat white

in hand. For so long I had been looking forward to the warmth and energy kick of a coffee, but when it cooled to drinking temperature I was unfortunately disappointed. After putting this story to Ken, he gave me this response.

“Compare us to a coffee house at a shopping centre. They have thousands of customers throughout the day, but our customers, especially when buying coffees, come in waves. Like you said, that’s sometimes between lectures. When the baristas are rushed, they can make mistakes. Unfortunately, sometimes we can’t dedicate the time to each and every coffee that we’d like to, especially when our customers are in a rush as well.

“But if this happens, we need to know, so we can try and fix it. If you’d brought that coffee back, we would have made you another or given you a refund. Or if you told me the date and time, we could check who was working to make sure they were going through the right process,” said Ken. Rodney then added, “Even in a five-star hotel, you’re going to get some complaints. But in reality, we get very little complaints coming through to us.”

Finally, I brought up the topic of options for gluten-free or halal consumers. Rodney started by saying that they do have some options, similar to what you’d expect in normal cafés. He suggested that if you are a regular customer, and you are willing to commit to purchasing items, the cafés are certainly able to assist you. “If you are a regular customer to Hackett Café, you can ask the supervisor to keep it aside for you every day.” Ken then added that while they are happy to cater to special needs, in the past when they have specifically bought special products, they haven’t sold. “In the past, we have had people ask for specific gluten-free biscuits, but when we obtained and offered them nobody bought them.”

Reflecting upon these interviews, it certainly feels like everyone in Guild Catering is trying to provide an excellent standard to students, despite the negative words that seem to fly around online. As Tom said, perhaps perception is the biggest issue. I certainly know I’ll get a grease-fest if I go to Maccas, and perhaps worrying about the coffee might affect my senses even before I take a sip.

Ultimately, the Guild Council, who continue these policies, have been re-elected year after year. If you would like to have more of a say, why not take a part in Guild politics? But if that’s not your thing, still send through your feedback or suggestions, as it’s the only way changes will be made. The Guild and Guild Catering do everything they do for the benefit of the students; so if you have any suggestions, please let them know!

A Tale of Eight Eateries

Chicken Kebab	Ararat: \$9	Ref: \$8.50
Large Pasta	Broadway IGA: \$8.99	Reid Café: \$9
Large Noodles w/Veg	Chilliz: \$4	Hackett: \$5.50
Large Cappuccino	Rocket Fuel: \$5.50	Biz Café: \$4.90

(UWA prices do not include guild discount).

Eat and Drink Survey Responses

- 75% of respondents said hot food choices was average or better
- 73% said hot food quality was average or better
- 26% rated prices as poor
- Gold Guild members generally ranked outlets more highly

BASED ON THE VASCULATURE AND PROTEIN CONTENT OF HUMAN FLESH, IT HAS BEEN HYPOTHESISED THAT COOKED HUMAN MEAT WOULD TASTE LIKE VEAL.