

Bringing Science to the Cafés

Forget the digestive biscuits and clotted cream: Britain's most sumptuous export could soon be a trendy new concept called *Café Scientifique*

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—It's a spring evening in the Borders bookshop here in the center of town, and the coffee bar is packed. A diverse crowd, from students with notebooks on their knees to retired couples out for an evening's entertainment, watches raptly as a slightly ruffled middle-aged academic steps up to the microphone. Tony Minson is not a book author on tour: He's a virologist at the University of Cambridge who's preparing to tell his audience all about "mad cow" disease and the human version, a fatal malady that sends shivers down the spines of most Britons.

The topic is grisly, but the forum is a lively new way of engaging people in burning issues of science and technology: *Café Scientifique*, a monthly gathering where members of the public listen to a talk and

soming across the globe, from Boston to Copenhagen to Sydney. "We want to internationalize the dialogue about science," says U.K. coordinator Teresa Anderson.

In the Cambridge café, the clink of coffee cups and the hiss of espresso machines provide a soothing background as Minson wends his way through the strange history of prion diseases. Britain's cafés follow a tried-and-tested format: The venue is a place where people normally feel relaxed, such as a pub or coffee shop; the speaker should be charismatic; and following a half-hour talk and a break to replenish drinks, the floor is open.

Duncan Dallas, an independent TV producer, founded Britain's first *Café Scientifique* in Leeds in 1998 after reading an obituary on Marc Sautet, who started France's *Café Philosophique* movement in 1992. Dallas wondered if a variation on scientific issues would fly. To find out, he put a sign in the window of his local wine bar and asked his friends to spread the word. About 40 people turned up, and subsequent meetings have continued to pull in the crowds.

The key, says Dallas, is "to pick a subject that is a bit controversial and sexy," such as the rise of antibiotic-resistant superbugs or whether machines could someday have emotions. "You need to know your audience and build up trust." Word got around and cafés soon popped up in Nottingham, Newcastle, and Oxford.

Back at Cambridge, Minson has wrapped up his talk. While many listeners line up for more coffee, a few avail themselves of the masseuse brought in to knead aching shoulders for a small fee. Snatches of conversation from some students suggest that Minson's talk has struck a chord: They are chatting animatedly about the unpleasant rituals of the South Fore people of New Guinea, who once ate the brains of victims of kuru, a deadly prion disease, and fell victim themselves. Soon the Q&A session begins and many of the questions cause Minson to pause for thought. One interlocutor wonders whether

black-and-white cows, often pictured in news photos as mad cow victims, are more susceptible. Not at all an off-the-wall question, pipes up a veterinary student in the audience, who says that some breeds do appear to be at higher risk of contracting the disease.

In 2001, Dallas and others won a £170,000 grant from the Wellcome Trust that pays Anderson's salary and some publicity expenses for new cafés and for a Web site on event listings and resources (www.cafescientifique.org). The aim is to create 20 new cafés in 3 years. Anderson targets cities that are large enough to provide a good-sized audience and hunts for people with experience in popularizing science. "I network like hell, and someone eventually pops up," she says. Anderson helps organizers find a venue, arrange the first few speakers, and publicize the events. After that, the groups should run on their own: The organizers do it for fun, the venues are not paid but benefit from the extra customers, and the speaker's expenses are collected by passing a hat.

In France, a loose network of similar events, also called *Bars des Sciences* or *Zincs des Sciences*, sprang up around the same time as the British cafés. The French network held a meeting in Paris last month that was attended by café organizers from across Europe. "We feel there are things we can learn from each other," says Anderson. Countries have adopted different styles. In Paris, for example, they often have a panel rather than a single speaker, and in Copenhagen they try to pair a scientist and an artist to talk on the same theme.

This year *Café Scientifique* went global. The British Council, a government-funded body that promotes U.K. culture and educational opportunities overseas, has spread the word to its offices in 109 countries worldwide. Several so far have run café-style events with British speakers and more are expected soon. Rather than have speakers travel overseas, the council ran a series of pilot cafés early this year using videoconferencing to link a speaker and a facilitator in the U.K. with audiences in Yugoslavia, India, and Malaysia. More such events are in the works. And in February journalists from the British magazine *New Scientist* established a beachhead in Boston with North America's first café.

It's getting late in Cambridge and Chris Smith, a London-based physician who helps organize the café, is packing up. He and his co-organizers have been videotaping the events and plan to put them on their Web site (www.thenakedscientists.com). "If you plug into the public interest, then you'll have a good café," Smith says. Indeed, science debates could be coming soon to a cozy café near you.

—DANIEL CLERY



Cafe society. A diverse crowd gathers in this Cambridge coffee bar once a month to discuss "controversial and sexy" developments in science.

then participate in open debate. "It's a way of democratizing science," says Nicole Towler of the British Council's science team. "People value the opportunity to engage with an expert. Anyone's voice can be heard."

What began as a hobby for a few enthusiasts 5 years ago has grown into a movement. With the help of a grant from the Wellcome Trust, Britain's mammoth biomedical research charity, more than 20 cafés are either operating or due to start this year. And last month, café organizers from across Europe met in Paris to compare notes and experiences. Indeed, *Cafés Scientifiques* are blos-