

# **CAN A SPORTS CENTER CHANGE THE MENU WITHOUT CHANGING THE CULTURE?**

## **A cultural analysis of the cafeteria of Grøndal Centret**

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## **Introduction**

According to the Københavns Madhus, approximately 64 percent of the food sold in public institutions (including orphanages, businesses, cafeterias and nursing homes) is organic. Københavns Madhus, in conjunction with Københavns Kommune, is currently working to increase that number to 90 percent by 2015. A major obstacle in reaching that goal has been the city's sports centers. Geared more towards socialization than fitness, the menus at many of these facilities are more appropriate for an Irish pub than a health facility and it has been assumed that customers would be extremely resistant to change.

Visits to sports centers that reached the benchmark of 75 percent organic food sold answered the initial question of whether it is possible to have an organic café at a sports center. But places like Svanmøllehallen and Bellahøj Svømmestadion only reached their goal by completely remodeling their cafeterias and erasing any connection they had to the past. So the goal of my paper is to answer the following question: Can the menu at Grøndal Centret's cafeteria change without changing the culture? In my pursuit to answer this question, I will use data collected and Regina Bendix's theory "The Cream Effect" to illustrate the roles and current culture present at Grøndal Centret's cafeteria. Also, areas that are most accommodating to change will be identified. Next, I will provide recommendations to prevent the alienation of long time patrons and keep the traditional culture intact. Finally, limits of this particular study will be analyzed and the less obvious goals of the Københavns Kommune will be briefly discussed.

## **Methodology**

Classic ethnographic participant observation techniques were used throughout the study. Observations were made for five consecutive days between 1pm and 7pm. The group of researchers I was a part of visited Grøndal Centret's cafeteria September 11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup>. We also visited Bellahøj Svømmestadion and Nørrebrohallen September 12<sup>th</sup> and Svanmøllehallen September 15<sup>th</sup> to compare and contrast with the data obtained at Grøndal Centret.

To better understand the general attitude towards the food served, we conducted several informal interviews with patrons eating at the café. Mine Sylow and Pia Rasmussen as well as several workers at the facilities were also interviewed to help frame the relationship between the Københavns Madhus and sports centers' cafeterias.

A field map of Grøndal Centret's café and a spreadsheet (please refer to appendix A and appendix B) detailing the time of day, table number (or if the customer took their meal to-go), observed dishes and drinks ordered, and group composition was drafted to better illustrate patterns in the groups of patrons inside the café and possibly answer the question "Who was eating what with whom?" No field maps were drawn for the other locations visited because the number of customers patronizing the café was either too small to warrant such effort

(Nørrebrohallen and Svanmøllehallen) or there was no working cafeteria (Bellahøj Svømmestadion). The term “observed dishes ordered” is used since this information is solely based on my observations and was not confirmed by the customer. For instance, pasta with chicken was recorded if it appeared to be the pasta with chicken dish that was offered on the menu. The dish could have been the cold pasta salad or the warm pasta with chicken, but only an interview with the person eating the dish could offer a definitive answer. Also, snacks are defined as an item that can be eaten on the go and does not require a plate, knife or fork to be eaten. For example, whole fruit, French hotdogs, slush ice, and toasted sandwiches (also referred to as grilled cheese) were all classified as snacks.

## **Analysis**

### What is Grøndal Centret?

Sunderland and Denny showed that the word coffee has many meanings and its definition changes depending on the person who is defining it. An American may describe it as a work ritual, for a Japanese businessman, it may be associated with modernity, and for a person from Holland, it is a rite of passage (2007,p 67). Similarly, the definition of sports center is just as fluid. Some may say the term is synonymous with health club or gym. However, neither definition alone can be accurately applied to Grøndal Centret. On the Kubik website, it is promoted as a “versatile sports, activities, and cultural center” offering classes in everything from full contact kickboxing to archery. My discovery of ads for a weekend trip for pensioners and a dance sports team revealed that it is the connector between many overlapping social networks. People don’t go to Grøndal Centret to just exercise, they meet their friends, organize trips, and prepare for dance competitions there. It is a space that is defined by its various users, just like coffee.

The cafeteria is an extension of this. Our research showed that it functions not only as a food provider, but also a workspace and men’s club.

### The role of the cafeteria as a food provider

During our visits to the cafeteria of Grøndal Centret we attempted to record all of the food we observed customers eating. Time and space difficulties that Barbara Czarniawska described were soon made apparent as it was impossible to be in more than one place at the same time and a number of food purchases were not recorded simply because we did not see them occur. Also, to answer her question “How does one study the same object in different places at the same time (2007.p9)” an ideal research project would have several researchers positioned at different cafeterias at the same time of day. Unfortunately, language and logistical barriers prevented us from doing so. Asking the workers present to keep a diary about the customers would have minimized the number of missed purchases, but that would have placed a severe burden on them and was therefore unfeasible.

In light of these obstacles, I was able to record approximately 109 customers at Grøndal Centret during the course of our study. My research shows that beverages, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, were the most popular items and accounted for 50.4 percent (55) of the total purchased recorded. Of the beverages purchased, 40 percent (22) was beer. Various snacks were also very popular, collectively comprising 36.7 percent or 42 of the total items purchased, most of which was slush ice or ice cream. Hot food only comprised 27 percent of the total purchases I observed. Interestingly, most of the hot dishes that patrons enjoyed were relatively healthy, such as chicken and pasta or chili con carne, and could be easily improved by using better quality, organic ingredients. Another interesting observation was that food was often purchased by women or couples with children. Men typically ordered only drinks or snacks and children that came with other children ordered snacks, usually slush ice.

Most of the respondents we spoke with said they would welcome more organic choices in the cafeteria, and one man even stated that he believed it was part of the duty of the cafeteria to help patrons achieve their health goals. However, none of the respondents made any specific recommendations concerning the overall health of the food served, such as less sugar, more whole grains, etc. All respondents said they wouldn't mind a nominal increase in price, provided that the quality of food justified the increase. In other words, they would pay more for good food, but not for bad organic food.

#### The cafeteria as a workspace

We witnessed a number of patrons sitting in the cafeteria, working on their laptops. While it is possible that they could have been working on personal hobbies, the professional literature that filled their tables and the apparent time sensitivity (they often looked at their watches while drinking coffee and typing away furiously) led me to believe otherwise. Guests that appeared to work rarely ordered food or snacks. Some ordered nothing. I suspect that the free internet that is available throughout the center played a large role in customers deciding to bring their laptops to the area.

Another factor that probably helped steer the non-eating, possibly working customers to the cafeteria is the lack of alternate sitting areas. There are tables and chairs scattered around the center, but they are in front of various courts and therefore quite loud.

Obviously, interviews with these particular customers could have confirmed or challenged many of my suspicions. We refrained from doing so since they appeared happy to be left alone and we doubted they would be willing to cooperate.

#### The cafeteria as a men's club

Men's clubs, particularly in a British sense, have historically served working class gentlemen. They were places where a man would play games, gamble, drink, and relax with his fellow

workers. In a time before the car was dominant and the invention of the Internet, these were “almost like an extension of our living room” (Charrington, 2010, p1).

I believe the cafeteria at Grøndal Centret serves a similar role for a large number of its patrons. During our initial visit, we were struck by the mismatched items at the table next to us. Clad in sweaty work out gear (evidence of a rather intense session) was a large group of men surrounded by sports equipment and many bottles of beer. They drank and talked for about an hour. But judging by the amount of beers present at our arrival, they probably sat in the cafeteria for two.

Scenes like this one were reenacted several times during our research. We witnessed many groups of men walking about the center with equipment in one hand and a six-pack of Carlsberg in the other. About 61 percent (67) of the customers that used the cafeteria during our study were men. Some were joined by women and children, but most were either sitting alone, or part of a larger group of men. They usually drank beer, and like one of our respondents, often came to the cafeteria to have a drink after a game.

A special group of men that highlighted the men’s club atmosphere of the cafeteria for me was the pensioners that ordered biksemad. Not mentioned on any menu, ordering this traditional dish signaled membership to an exclusive club. They did not carry any athletic equipment, nor did they wear any athletic gear. And the fact that they ate a meal that is high in calories, fat, and salt, it is safe to assume that health was not their primary reason for being at the center. It appeared that their only reason for coming to the cafeteria was to eat comfort food and socialize with their male friends.

#### The culture of the cafeteria, the “cream” of Grøndal Centret

Regina Bendix states that cream “is the additional touch, the extra that creates or enhances pleasure and thus is particularly suited to pamper, mollify, or (...) influence another” (2006,p.15) It is my argument that the cafeteria is the cream of Grøndal Centret, that it makes an already pleasurable experience more enjoyable. Ice cream is good, but ice cream topped with fresh whipped, double fat cream is better. In the same vein, playing squash / racquetball/ soccer etc. with your friends is fun, but ending the day with a cold beer and regaling each other with tall tales of expert sportsmanship is even more satisfying. Its role as a men’s club, particularly the pensioners and their plates of biksemad, is a clear example of the cream effect in action.

Bendix argues that “The cream effect produces first and foremost a sensory experience, lodged between the physiological and cognitive, individual and cultural awareness” (2006, p16.) The distinct smell of the cafeteria, a combination of fried potatoes and warm bread, the feel of a cold juice as it coats the back of your hot throat dry from panting, the sounds of laughter around you from the nearby table, all of these events help to paint a picture of the cafeteria that beckons your return once you enter Grøndal Centret, even if you are not hungry. Indeed,

Mine Sylow stated that the girls in her study of sports centers did not always eat out of hunger (2008, p.19). This helps to explain the presence of several patrons who ordered nothing to eat or drink. A respondent that said he never eats there, also stated that he goes to the cafeteria to have a beer with his friend after almost every match.

For the mothers who bought ice cream for their children or the father who shared the plate of pasta with his son, the cafeteria touched an emotional core. Obviously ice cream is not the healthiest item on the menu, and the father was probably still hungry after the pasta, but their children enjoyed the treats and I suspect the parents enjoyed the personal time they shared with them. To a certain extent, the food was and is unimportant. It is the memories and experiences associated with where the food or beverage was purchased that is.

Located in the heart of the center and away from all of the major exits, the cafeteria is a destination. People make a conscious decision to go there. The seventies style décor and sky lights overhead make it very cozy. And even though the seats are plastic, they are extremely comfortable and one can easily spend hours there without realizing the passage of time. As previously mentioned, there are other seating areas available, but none are as inviting as the cafeteria. In short, it's the perfect place to go after a workout to relax before heading home to the family.

#### Is this success: A look at the cafes of Svanmøllen, Nørrebrohallen, and Bellahøj

Compared to the cafeteria of Grøndal Centret, the cafes at Svanmøllen, Nørrebrohallen, and Bellahøj are lessons in what Københavns Kommune and Københavns Madhus should not do in their quest to bring organic food to sports centers.

Svanmøllen was recently renovated and Nørrebrohallen will be renovated shortly. However, neither café was alive with activity during our visits. Nørrebrohallen was totally empty, except for the staff. As for Svanmøllen, I wrote in my field diary that there was an hour where only 3 people purchased anything at the café, and I was one of them. According to the Københavns Madhus, the café is a success because it reached a goal of 75 percent organic food, but it was mainly because they removed hot food from the menu and replaced unhealthy items with organic versions. The slush ice is still filled with sugar and comes in colors not found in nature, but it is organic. The new café is the picture of what one would think an organic café would look like, complete with sleek black and white décor and shiny modern machines. However, the furniture is terribly uncomfortable, there were few customers, and no personality. There is no culture present because no one uses it. Or one could argue, no one uses it because there is no culture present. Placed in the front of the center, the cashier acts more like a receptionist and most patrons simply walk through on their way to the locker rooms or squash courts, completely ignoring the pictures of sandwiches in the display cases.

At the time of our visit to Bellahøj Svømmestadion, there was no working café. Workers in the center said they had trouble finding a vendor that was willing to meet the ambitious

goals set by the Københavns Madhus and so the space was empty. Talks with Pia Rasmussen revealed that a vendor was found for the space and they expected the café to open in October. Like Svanmøllen, the café is located in the front of the center and is outfitted with a pristine white interior, reminiscent of an Apple computer store. Unlike the other two locations, there appeared to be a desire for a cafeteria since we witnessed a mother host a birthday party for her young daughter in the area beside the closed café. Whether her actions are replicated by other patrons or was just an aberration is unknown.

I suspect that Bellahøj will suffer the same fate as the other cafes since it appears that more thought has gone into the design of the space than the feel. They all look nice, but none can be described as cozy or inviting. Like I just stated, the space feels more like a home for modern electronics than a place to eat, as if it is too clean to be soiled with food. The stark white walls and bright lights actually make the space visually cold and totally devoid of emotion. With the exception of Nørrebrohallen, the cafes are located at the front of the center and are part of the lobby, not their own separate space. Because of the constant influx of patrons walking through, I find it difficult to believe that customers of Svanmøllen and Bellahøj would feel as comfortable sitting for hours and enjoying a beer as they would at Grøndal Centret.

## **Conclusion**

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on my observations and interviews with staff and patrons of the various cafes visited. I believe these are the areas the clients should focus on if they hope to both bring organic food to sports centers and maintain the current client base.

#### 1. Use the staff

Many of the customers that we spoke to were open to more organic food being served in sports centers. Any resistance we encountered came from the staff and managers of the cafeterias. So my first recommendation would be to sell the idea first to the staff, then to the customers. Since food workers will be the first to introduce the menu to customers, they have to be willing participants in the campaign.

#### 2. Provide financial incentives for managers

Organic food is more expensive than non-organic food and as demonstrated at Bellahøj, the expense can be a major obstacle. Also, it is not fair to expect managers to shoulder the full financial responsibility for an experiment they have been forced to participate in. Since all sports centers will be converting to organic, use their numbers to barter with vendors for discounts on organic food.



### 3. Baby Steps

Make many, small changes. A total remodeling of the space is not needed, and as we have seen in several of the centers, is often unsuccessful. The space and menu have to be familiar to long-time customers or no one will use it.

### 4. Be consistent

If something is advertised as organic, then it should always be organic. Sometimes the potatoes at Grøndal Center are organic, sometimes they are not. Also, use established logos to communicate to patrons that the organic food served meets national standards.

### 5. Introduce penalties for non-compliance

A way to maintain consistency is to have penalties if the cafeteria managers break their contracts. Customers expressed a distrust of the cafeterias and their claims of organic food. The only way they will part with more of their money is if they are certain about the quality of food they are purchasing. Managers must be held accountable if they substitute non-organic food for organic and undermine the public's trust.

### 6. Let managers decide which non-organic food stays

Not every sport center will have a dedicated group of customers that ask for biksevad, but it, as well as other dishes that have significant cultural ties to a space, should remain available for the patrons that want it. Removing it completely will signal to the people who eat it that they are no longer welcome in a place that they have patronized for years.

### 7. Keep the beer

While beer may not be an ideal drink at a place that should be focused on health, it, like biksevad, has a special place in the hearts of the customers. No good business would remove an item that 20 percent of the customers ordered and it would be foolish to ask sports centers to do so. Also, do not try to substitute organic for non organic. People do not want healthy beer, they want a cheap, tasty, cold one.

### 8. Make the cafeteria a destination, not an kitschy afterthought

Ideally, customers should say, "Let's go the cafeteria for a bite to eat" instead of "Let's pick something up from the stand on the way out". Placing it next to the exit, as an integrated part of the lobby means that customers will walk through it, not stay and congregate in it. What separated Grøndal Centret from the other cafeterias is that it has its own separate space and identity.

Concerns: Why are Københavns Kommune and the København Madhus promoting organic?

If Svanmøllen, Nørrebrohallen, and Bellahøj are all considered successes by the Københavns Madhus, then I ask, what is their definition of success? How can an empty café that is ignored by the patrons be considered successful? It is only reasonable to assume that factors, aside from just the amount of organic food sold, are also part of the equation and I suspect that both agencies are interested in changing the entire culture of sports centers.

The first interview we conducted was with Mine Sylow. She explained that simply replacing conventional food with organic was not enough, but her organization, under the authority of Københavns Kommune, hoped to ultimately change the present food culture. Their goal is politically, not just nutritionally, motivated, as it was the politicians of the city of Copenhagen that established and funded Københavns Madhus. The handout given to my team states that the mission of the Københavns Madhus is to “improve the culture associated with meals” while eliminating “inadequate meals or poor eating situations”. A reasonable question to ask is what constitutes poor eating situations?

The fact that organic has been the main focus of their campaign is concerning since there is little evidence to suggest that organic food is more nutritious than conventionally grown food. In fact, a report published by the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition states that,

On the basis of a systematic review of studies of satisfactory quality, there is no evidence of a difference in nutrient quality between organically and conventionally produced foodstuffs. The small differences in nutrient content detected are biologically plausible and mostly relate to differences in production methods (2009,p 680)

The only discernable benefits of organic food are the environmental ones. However, environmental effects are not the reasons promoted for the push to change the menu of sports centers, health benefits are. But if the Københavns Kommune and Københavns Madhus wanted to have a greater impact on the health of patrons, I argue that they would focus more on the fat, salt, and sugar content of the food served, not primarily the growing conditions. Surely food lower in these compounds would help customers more than organic versus conventional since they have been directly linked to obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Alas, these questions are beyond the scope of this present study, yet provide rich information for future research.

### Limitations

The primary limits of this study are concerning time and space. I believe that we could have obtained a much more accurate picture of sports centers cafeterias if we had the opportunity to visit several locations, at the same time throughout the day. The crowd that comes in to Grøndal Centret at 12 noon on a weekday is probably different from the crowd that visits Nørrebrohallen at 6 in evening on the weekend.

I'd also like to conduct several, in depth interviews of patrons in all of the cafeterias instead of several short ones, primarily on the customers of Grøndal Centret. In spite of these areas for improvement and my concern that the clients are interesting in changing more than just the menus at the sports centers' cafeterias, I believe the answer to my original question is yes. I strongly believe it is possible to change the menu to more organic food without changing the present culture. Vendors should follow the recommendations that I listed, but more importantly, know and respect the culture that is there so that it can flourish in light of new dietary restrictions.

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