

SCU VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS

INTRODUCTION

Bon Appetit is the restaurant company that provides SCU's dining facilities. Their website (www.bonappetit.com) states that they strive to serve "great tasting, authentic and nutritious food that exceeds the expectations of our guests including vegetarian and vegan diners." I was curious to study if Bon Appetit was living up to its goals, if they were filling the needs of the vegetarian and vegan student body. Additionally, if the students felt that the cuisine was lacking in some respect, I wanted to be able to present clear data and helpful suggestions to the managers on campus.



RESEARCH METHODS

I originally intended to survey SCU's vegetarian and vegan population by setting up a table in Market Square with a giant sign that read, "Vegetarians - Come Talk to Me!" I set up the table one evening and sat there for two hours, and managed to survey three vegetarians. The handout is pictured to the left.

SLURP Dining Preferences Survey

Gender: M F
Year in School: Fr So Jr Sr Other

Circle the statement that you feel best describes your eating preferences:

(I do not eat any animal products)
(I do not eat any meat or fish, but I do eat dairy and/or eggs)
(I do not eat any meat, but I do eat fish and other seafood)
(I eat meat or fish occasionally)

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: 1 as "Strongly Agree" and 4 as "Strongly Disagree"

1) I think it is easy to find food on the SCU dining plan that satisfy my eating preferences.
4 3 2 1

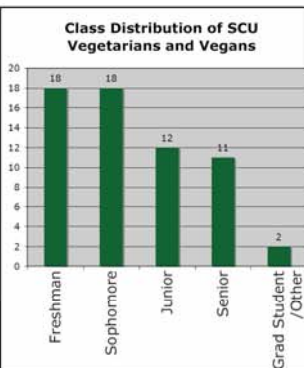
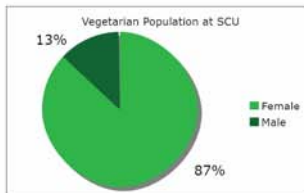
2) The variety of food that I find at Market Square is comparable to the variety of food that I find at home.
4 3 2 1

3) I think that Market Square's current offerings have improved from last year.
4 3 2 1

Please write down any additional comments or suggestions you might have:

After this incident I decided to switch methods, and to create an online survey for vegetarians and vegans to fill out. As predicted, this survey attracted many more respondents. I was able to meet and exceed my goal of 50 respondents. The questions online were identical with the ones on paper. Respondents to the online survey typically wrote longer comments than the ones on paper, allowing for more detailed feedback.

Unfortunately, I only had access to the CPhi RIC and SCCAP mailing lists. Both emails that I sent out asked people to forward the survey link to their vegetarian friends. The surveyed populations, therefore, may have skewed results based on the common attitudes between the two groups. Based on the fairly high number of respondents, however, the collected responses should approximate the attitudes of the general student body.



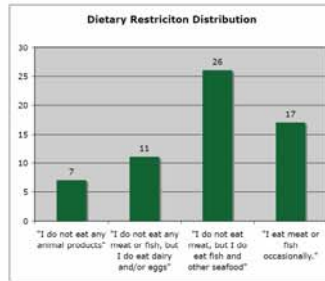
DEMOGRAPHICS

The surveyed population turned out to be overwhelmingly female, with 53 of the total 61 respondents. The class distribution of the respondents dropped off markedly between freshman/sophomore and junior/senior, and then again at graduate student/other. The magnitude of these groups corresponds directly, however, with the frequency that these groups use the dining services. Juniors and seniors have smaller mealplans and are presumed to spend less time eating on-campus. The graduate student/other category is presumed to spend even less time eating on-campus. Since this was a self-selected sample, the time spent eating on-campus could correspondingly influence how many people responded.



RESULTS

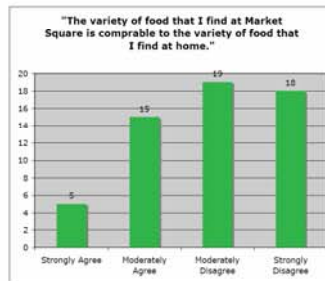
To avoid daunting potential respondents, I kept the survey very short. After basic demographic information, the survey asked respondents to choose the category that best fit their dietary preferences. Following that, the survey contained three statements, and asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement.



To each statement, there were four possible answers from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Eliminating a middle, or non-committal answer was a conscious decision, to force respondents to pick an opinion on each statement.

Pescetarians (persons who eat seafood, but not meat) comprised the clear majority of the respondents. The next largest demographic was people who were vegetarians for most of the time, with occasional allowances of meat or fish. Strict vegetarians made up an expectedly smaller number of respondents, with strict vegans as the clear minority.

The first statement asked respondents if they agreed that it is easy to find food on campus that fits their dietary preferences. The majority of respondents selected "Moderately Agree." A slight majority of respondents responded favorably or negatively, but a sizable group disagreed with the statement. Additionally, more respondents strongly disagreed than strongly agreed.



The third and final statement asked respondents if they agreed that Bon Appetit had improved its vegetarian and vegan options from last year. This question had fewer responses than the others, because only sophomores or above could compare. The responses for this question are overwhelmingly affirmative, with a small minority moderately disagreeing and no respondents strongly disagreeing.

COMMENTS

The final part of the survey asked respondents if they had any additional comments for feedback for Bon Appetit. A sampling:

"Bon Appetit does have vegan hot meals now, which is a huge improvement as salad is not the only thing vegetarians eat. However, their vegetarian version of all other regular hot meals is always tofu. As a soy-allergic vegetarian, I know I am a minority and don't need to be catered to, but I do know a few other people who are in the same situation."

"The vegan/vegetarian option at Roma that is occasionally offered is much appreciated, as are the vegan soup options. However, these are only sporadic, and I have a very hard time eating a balanced diet that follows my diet restrictions."



"I really wish that Bon Appetit would serve just some nice, plain, steamed vegetables-- make a new station called 'Vegetables' or something... Seriously, we don't need nice -cheese filled/ oil-drenched vegetables, just some nice steamed vegetables?"



"They need more vegetarian selections high in protein without relying on cheese!"

"Spread out the vegetarian/vegan options throughout the day. It is annoying when most of the options for lunch are vegetarian but then dinner that day has no vegetarian options. It would be nice to see at least one warm vegetarian option per meal."

"More hummus!"

"In my opinion, vegetarian options are superb, but it is always hard to accommodate vegans. I understand that Bon Appetit needs to focus on meeting the needs of the majority rather than the vegan minority and it is ultimately a business that seeks to make a profit, so perhaps the solution is allowing vegan students to have even more limited meal plans (in terms of number of points) than are offered currently. As a vegan, I know how to cook for myself and how to prepare my own food, but I was pouring so much 'wasted' money into my required Bon Appetit meal plan that I did not have as much money to spend at the grocery store. This became an issue because I spent my unused meal points on friends who wanted free meals, which meant I was still financially supporting the meat, dairy and egg industries I sought to boycott."

CONCLUSIONS

Both the statistics and the comments speak to Bon Appetit's improvements over the past year - and to the problems that they still need to address. Some respondents asked for more general options, others asked for more specific items like steamed vegetables and vegan cookies. Several people commented on the menu issue, that perhaps Bon Appetit could offer a smaller mealplan for vegans and vegetarians who are forced to supplement their diet with outside food. Overall, the comments praised Bon Appetit's effort and asked for more variety.

Regarding Bon Appetit's stated commitment to "great tasting, authentic, and nutritious food," respondents tentatively agreed. The agree/disagree statements show that respondents noticed and appreciated Bon Appetit's effort over the previous years, and only hoped for more improvement.

The final stage of this project will be compiling the data into a presentation and taking it to the managers of Bon Appetit on campus. Once the managers know what the students want, they can hopefully start providing it. Additionally, if there are more plentiful and more varied vegetarian/vegan options, the general student body will be more likely to reduce their meat consumption. Current vegetarians and vegans are able to find food to fit their dietary preferences, but they could always use some help from the kitchen. As one respondent concluded:

"Being a vegetarian is a choice I made, so I do not get angry when there are not tons of options. I make it work, it's part of the sacrifice."

