

Serving Science, with a Side of Sushi and a Sip of Sake

Great news! President Obama has publicly affirmed that science must play a key role in building a stronger and healthier society on a stronger, healthier planet.¹ Finally, science is chic!

But to many people science itself remains obscure, incomprehensible, and boring. Such off-putting impressions prevent citizens from developing scientific literacy and limit the pool of young people eager to enter research.

One small, friendly way for scientists to connect with the general public is through a science café. The City University of New York (CUNY) started one such science café, called Serving Science, in Autumn 2008. Here we share information about science cafés in general and Serving Science in particular.

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What Are Science Cafés?

Science cafés are settings for informal talks for the general public given by professional scientists about timely issues in current scientific research. Typically, these events take place monthly in casual eating/drinking places—a bar, restaurant, or coffee house—and last for about an hour. The scientific host (in our case, CUNY, www.cuny.edu/research) invites, as a speaker for the event, a faculty researcher who can chat about her or his area of expertise, emphasizing the open questions and challenges, then discussing how these are being tackled.

Usually speakers give their talks sans PowerPoint slides or other fancy props. Also, speakers are encouraged to leave as much technical jargon as possible back in the lab, and instead bring boatloads of useful metaphors, similes, and clear explanations. This makes the presentation inviting and understandable to nonspecialists.

The bar or restaurant manager who provides the space usually charges a cover fee (\$10 in New York City), which includes one free drink. Some venue hosts give discounts to event attendees who stay for food and drinks after the talk.

Spreading the Word about Science

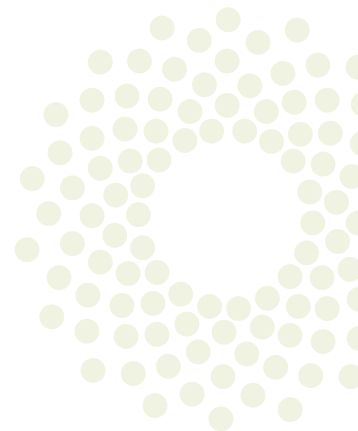
Last summer we both wanted to start a science café. I, Gillian Small, CUNY's vice chancellor for research, was eager to get the word out about the system-wide expansion of research programs within the CUNY colleges. And I, Beth Schachter, a science communications consultant, having learned about the international science café movement (www.sciencecafes.org/) through the Coalition for the Public Understanding of Science (www.copusproject.org/), wanted to contribute to science literacy among the people of my city.

So in August our collaboration began. Now all we had to do was recruit speakers who could start a dialogue with the public and find a venue that CUNY could take over once a month.

Most scientists have little experience giving research talks without using pre-made visual aids. But science cafés use an informal format to encourage interaction from the audience. Therefore, to launch our science café and develop an audience, we chose speakers who were well seasoned at giving impromptu talks to groups of nonspecialists. These faculty leaders came from the “hot topic” areas of public health, renewable energy, environmental challenges, and neuroscience.

Where to hold the science café? Consider this scenario: A woman walks into a bar in a major metropolitan area. Smiling at the manager, she says, “Hi there. How would you like to turn over your establishment one night a month to a bunch of academic scientists and their friends?”

Most restaurant and bar managers around Manhattan who were asked to be the host venue for Serving Science declined. Arthur Shi, however, immediately saw the win-win potential of the proposal. Shi runs Kouzan, a Japanese restaurant (www.kouzanny.com) that has two separate dining rooms and sits near public transportation but on a minor thoroughfare. Thus, for Shi, giving one dining room to Serving Science once per month enables him to introduce Kouzan to a new group of potential patrons.



Getting the Word Out

To spread the word about the science café, CUNY's Communications Department created the Serving Science logo and used it for a website (<http://web.cuny.edu/research/Serving-Science-CUNY-Science-Cafe.html>), 5- × 6-inch cards, and 3- × 4-foot posters of Serving Science calendar events. "Read this and pass it along" emails went to a CUNY mailing list, to listservs for science writers, and to many friends and neighbors. And, of course, we posted announcements on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

For the events themselves, we knew we would need a sound system. We rented one for the first two meetings. Then, seeing that the gatherings would continue, CUNY bought a microphone and speakers that we store at Kouzan between events.

Serving Science Worked!

Despite the fact that New York City already has three or four ongoing science cafés (www.sciencecafes.org/find.html), the system seems far from saturated. Even the first gathering drew almost 50 people, and later ones had more attendees. People who came in February

brought their friends for the March and April events. Parents brought their children, and children brought their parents. The speakers, kept on their toes by lots of probing questions from the audience, for the most part gave clear, informative answers. Indeed, we captured audiovideo evidence of one outstanding presentation, now posted on the Web (<http://real.cuny.tv/ramgen/specials/cunysciencecafeAll.rm?usehostname>).

And, much to our collective delight, with each subsequent event, more people stayed to dine after the presentation.

After year one of Serving Science, we report a shared eagerness to start year two in autumn 2009. Perhaps you could start a science café in your neighborhood! ■

—*Beth Schachter, independent science consultant,*
and *Gillian Small, The City University of*
New York, City College

Footnote

¹"Science is more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, our environment, and our quality of life than it has ever been before."

—*Barack Obama, April 27, 2009, at the*
National Academy of Sciences

Year One at CUNY's Serving Science

Each event started at 6:00 pm and consisted of a 45-minute talk by the speaker followed by about 10 minutes of questions and comments from the audience. Speakers typically also encouraged questions from the audience during the presentation, and audiences eagerly obliged with scores of good questions. Most often, the discussion could have continued beyond the allotted hour, but was ended by the CUNY host, in order to turn back the dining room to Kouzan and its patrons.

Presentation titles for year-one events were:

- Cancer Susceptibility: Genetics Loads the Gun but Environment Pulls the Trigger
- Hyperspace, Time Travel, and the Physics of the Impossible
- Energy at the Turning Point: The Role of Renewables
- Water in the Line of Fire: Origins and Solutions to the Global Water Crisis
- Functional Recovery after Spinal Cord Injury—Dream or Reality?
- Thinking Outside the Jack-in-the-Box: Novel Approaches to the Treatment of ADHD

All faculty members who spoke this year said that they thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and especially liked the questions from members of the audience. Therefore, we plan to run year two using the same casual format and means of choosing speakers as we did in year one. ■

