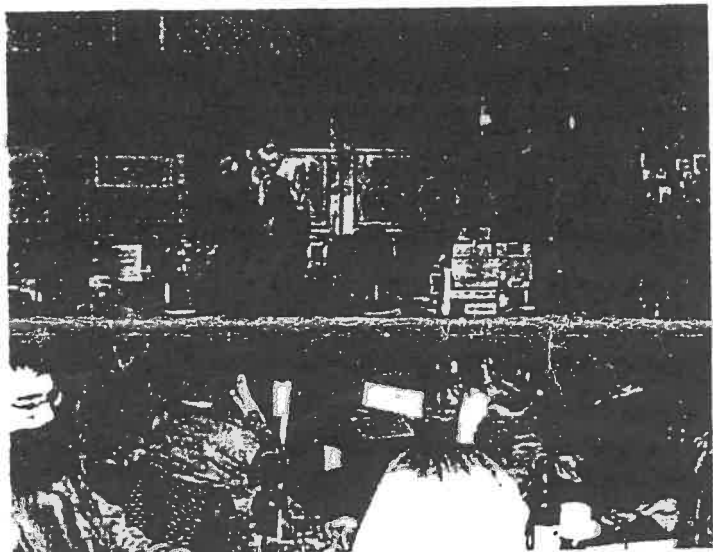


Science café offers food for thought

The public understanding of science has found an unlikely champion in an eatery on the outskirts of Leeds. Liz Bond pays a visit.

It's a Monday night in the middle of winter and the north of England is freezing over. The streets of Chapel Allerton, a quiet residential suburb of Leeds, are dark and deserted, yet down a narrow lane a small café is bursting with life. In *Vino Veritas* is crammed wall to wall with people keen to be in on the evening's entertainment. There is no special deal to be found on the food, and it's not even happy hour. These customers have left their warm homes to join a discussion on the recent research into the workings of the brain.

The speaker perched on the café counter is Rita Carter, a medical journalist who has just written a book entitled 'Mapping the mind'.



Hot science topics are on the menu at Café Scientifique

In the audience is a woman who wants to understand more about her son who has autism. A few customers earnestly take notes, presumably in an attempt not to be caught out in the open debate which will dominate the evening, while in the corner sits a group of university lecturers who seem more concerned with getting through all the bottles of wine they've ordered.

Twice a month, just as tonight, *Vino Veritas* becomes *Café Scientifique*. Here a lay audience gets the chance to discuss hot topics of science with renowned experts. A bunch of non-scientists choosing to discuss science for fun may seem an unlikely scenario. But the success of *Café Scientifique* reflects the public's growing interest in matters previously deemed out of their reach.

Café Scientifique is the brainchild of Duncan Dallas, the head of XYTV, a television company that makes science and medical documentaries. He came up with the idea last summer while he was reading the obituary of Marc Sautet, founder of the *Café Philosophique* in France. Debating philosophy over a *café au lait* and baguette may have

taken off in France where there are now 80 such cafés, but Dallas wasn't convinced the formula would work this side of *la Manche*.

'Anglo Saxons will not sit around discussing philosophy for two hours,' he says. But he thought they might be happier discussing something more tangible. Mulling over these ideas, he gazed out of his office window to the café across the road, and, *voilà*, *Café Scientifique* was born.

Although the speakers at the café are only paid expenses, attracting them has been remarkably easy.

'They don't get many invitations to speak to a lay or mixed audience where nothing's at stake, where there are no academics to sit and split hairs with them. Their career is not going to depend on it,' he says.

Sir John Maddox, the former editor of *Nature*, was not afraid to cause a stir when he told the café audience that he didn't think the big bang theory was going to work. 'I think people are amazed to hear that kind of frank discussion. They don't think that's what scientists do,' says Dallas.

Dallas is always looking for ways to raise the public's awareness of what science is about, so that science can be opened up rather than appearing like a 'big fortress of knowledge'.

He chooses speakers and subjects that will grab the imagination: 'I'm afraid it's no good just having a lecture on mechanical engineering. You have to pick something that's intrinsically a little bit sexy,' he says.

But it is also the informal setting of the café that contributes to its success. 'The public are coming to it on their own terms,' Dallas says. 'It's a nice place to spend some time. They can come and go as they want. Their voice will be heard if they wish to ask questions or opine. They can have a say in what's going on.'

Other speakers at the café have included Helena Cronin, organiser of the Darwin lectures and a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, who spoke about feminism in relation to Darwinism, and Anthony O'Hear of the University of Bradford, whose talk covered the philosophy of evolutionary theory. The café has also attracted big names from the media (see Box).

This week the philosopher and author Mary Midgley will lead a discussion on scientific imperialism, while in a fortnight's

time Aaron Sloman, professor of cognitive science at the University of Birmingham, will deliver a talk on artificial intelligence.

As for the age-old problem of academics not being great communicators, Dallas says the relaxed and intimate setting makes it very hard to lose the audience's attention: 'You can't be very academic in a café full of 30 or 40 people,' he points out.

As the evening goes by the attention of the audience is unwavering, and by the level of the debate you could be forgiven for

People are half scared, half fascinated by what's going on in science

believing that most of Yorkshire's neurologists are present. 'People are half scared, half fascinated by what's going on in science,' says Dallas. 'They want to be warned about what is going to happen next, but they want to understand it as well.'

Dallas is keen to cover areas of contention and concern to the public, such as the way scientists are perceived to be tampering with the food we eat. He is also keeping an eye open for a speaker to discuss the technology of persuasion. But a man who can persuade people to stand shoulder-to-shoulder for two hours in a crowded café would appear to have this particular science down to a tee.

Café Scientifique is held on alternate weeks at *In Vino Veritas*, 8 Regent Street, Chapel Allerton, Leeds. Telephone +44-113 288 8767 for details, or visit www.aesops.force9.co.uk/cs/index.htm

Edited highlights

Controversial New York University physics professor Alan Sokal came to the café last autumn. He shot to fame after the US cultural studies journal *Social Text* published his article deconstructing quantum physics.

The piece won commendation from certain post-modern philosophers, but Sokal later revealed it was a spoof designed to expose the follies of cultural analysis. The hoax won him instant notoriety as a champion of scientific rationalism.

In a talk punctuated by laughter, Sokal poked fun at 'our philosophical French cousins' — a certain irony given the name and origins of *Café Scientifique*.

Oliver Sacks, the author of popular neurology books like 'The man who mistook his wife for a hat' and 'Awakenings', spoke in November about chemistry, a subject close to his heart. As a boy, Sacks became fascinated with chemistry, in particular the elements and their classification into the periodic table.