

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

In Holland, eat, drink and be monitored

By **Marlise Simons**

Thursday, November 22, 2007

WAGENINGEN, Netherlands: At first sight, nothing betrays the strange happenings at the Restaurant of the Future, a spacious, bright university canteen where scientists and students stop in for food and lunchtime chatter.

The chef, Jan Kiewied, is stir-frying peppers at a glowing stove, his staff is scrubbing pots and clients scoop up salads and lentil soup with no special ado. Yet everyone and everything is being recorded by hidden sensors and cameras.

Carry that soup to the cash register and you may activate a pair of invisible floor scales. Sit down to eat and the chair may start to measure your heartbeat. As you munch on that salad, a researcher on another floor may be watching how fast or slowly you chew.

The restaurant, set on the campus of the Wageningen University, feels friendly enough but it is fitted with hidden wiring and switches worthy of a battleship. In reality it is a new research center, devoted to exploring a both simple and complicated question: What makes people eat and drink the way they do?

Food companies and chefs have pondered the issue for years and all manner of test kitchens and taste labs have mushroomed along with the fast food industry. What distinguishes the Dutch inquiry is the scale of the experiments, unrivaled in Europe, said Rene Koster, the head of the project.

Over the next 10 years, a team of more than 20 scientists, including psychologists, computer technicians and physicists, will be monitoring staff members of the university as they come for lunch each day. Close to 250 people have signed up for the project that began this month.

Koster, an economist who works for the university's agrotechnology and food sciences group, said he hopes the findings will help policymakers, health experts and food executives who want to influence eating behavior. "We are all getting too heavy," said Koster, who looks rather trim and athletic.

"But telling people they may become ill, or even die from their habits has had limited effect. It's well known that warnings, food labeling, information campaigns, all this barely works. And health officials admit they have no real handle on how to get people to eat differently."

Therefore, to analyze the behavior of the human adult at lunch, the new lab-restaurant has prepared an impressive arsenal of hidden cameras and a substantial menu of tricks. Researchers will run tests by making small changes in the color of the lights, in accompanying sounds, in the scents or the furniture.

"How will people behave if we put out fresh flowers, or shine a red light on a dish," said Nico Heukels, research director of Sodexho, a catering company and partner in the project. "What if we put out square or colored plates. Will they choose healthier things if we spray fruity scent in the air?"

Answers will vary in different cultures, he continued, but understanding the effect of the eating environment matters more because people increasingly eat away from home. Dutch people nowadays



spend one third of their food budget on eating outside their home, Americans at least half, and Japanese two-thirds, Heukels said.

Financing for the \$4 million lab has come from the university and three private companies. Other firms have asked to join to run tests on their products.

The throbbing heart of this newfangled restaurant then is not the kitchen, but the high tech control rooms where researchers direct two dozen cameras hidden in the restaurant ceiling. They can zoom in on minute details, like where a client lingers at the buffet, how well he or she chews, how much is left on the plate. New technology includes "face readers" that automatically analyze expressions like staring, surprise, a smile or a frown.

"This can all be stored and kept for reference," said Lucas Noldus who designed the system.

Eating under the nose of Big Brother might have horrified diners of an earlier age, but the surveillance camera as a fixture of modern life - in lobbies, doorways, airports and shopping malls - evidently has lowered expectations for public privacy.

During a recent lunch, several clients said they were not bothered by the snooping.

"In a café on Saturday night I saw security cameras everywhere, it's getting normal," said Ilse Polet, a researcher. "I like this project, everyone is interested in eating and drinking."

At a different table, Bert Meurs, a plant scientist, said he had joined "because this research is a good idea, and the food is better than in the other canteens."

But he had read the small print about the privacy for some of the material. "I don't want to appear on the evening news swallowing my food," he said.

On another floor, tests with smaller groups will be even more intrusive. In one room diners disconcertingly line up and eat with their face to the wall. In another, chairs with sensors will measure saliva and body temperature.

The university has said it will publish the conclusions of studies made here, but not provide any video recordings.

"We'll be making more measurements and recordings here than any other place in the university," said Koster. Amid Dutch affluence, some studies will focus on leftovers and waste and others will test offering smaller portions.

"One third of all food is wasted in the Netherlands," said Koster.

On a tour of the restaurant's many secrets he pointed out an underground storage tank hidden beneath the lawn.

"Organic waste will be stored here and trucks will empty this, much like they empty the waste from planes," Koster said. "On a farm, the loads will be mixed with animal dung and produce biogas."

If the plan works, he said, such tanks could be installed in large restaurants or institutions like schools, hospitals or prisons.

"We'll call this an experiment in green catering, if you will," he said.

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