

Back Talk — Memories of Food and Thoughts about Library Service Quality

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I like to eat, and thoughts of memorable meals stay with me. That's nice, you say, but what has this to do with librarians or information. That is the problem with this column. I seem to want to tell a few stories but making them relate to our profession, our common interest in the information business is my challenge. So, just in case it isn't clear by the end of my allotted 1,000 words what this short piece is about — it is about the importance of excellent customer service, the importance of collection excellence.

First for food. I am not a food snob. In fact, while I can appreciate the beauty of the food in some Nuevo cuisine restaurants where you can remember how the food looked when presented on a large plate or white or Italian glass, how the sauces were draped across the plate like paint on canvas, such food is not my cup of tea.

If I am not an epicurean, what kind of food does appeal to me and anyway, where are these food memories? Let's begin with Shanghainese *xiaolongbao* or little steamer buns. When I was a young missionary in Taiwan I didn't have much money and so my choice of foods with which to satiate my love of eating was somewhat limited. For a while I lived in a fairly small city called Chaoyi. Of course even in Taiwan a small city can have half million or so fellow citizens. *Xiaolongbao* are made by wrapping small amounts of fatty chopped meat, meat gelatin, and who knows what else depending upon the cook in a simple tightly twisted/sealed round piece of very thin pasta-like substance of flour and water (you can read more in Answers.com). The buns are cooked in small bamboo round baskets with lids that are piled high one on top of another over an especially made caldron with boiling water that allows the steam to move upward through the chimney-like tower of bamboo steamers.

The secret of this kind of food is that the steam penetrates the pasta pouch making a soup of the fatty meat and gelatin that cannot escape until you bite it. My fellow missionary and I would go to a small eatery located by a canal whose walls only went up waist or chest high leaving lots of space for a breeze to penetrate, to move some of the steam with the aroma of the food being cooked out of the restaurant. This was an architectural win-win design that provided relief from the heat and advertising in the same step. On most days we could only afford two steamers of six small buns. I think

each steamer cost about 50 American cents each, a princely sum then. You would dip the bun in a little dish of soy sauce mixed with thread-like shredded ginger with your chop sticks of one hand — but with your Chinese spoon held in ready just below the bun to catch the soup that would escape once you bit into the bun with the fingers of your other hand (biting the bun not your fingers). This was a heavenly experience not to be forgotten. The simultaneous tastes of meat soup, meat, tangy soy sauce, and ginger was enormously satisfying. There was little conversation as you had to make sure that you got your fair share of this everyday delicacy.

So, what has this to do with libraries and information? Last week I was in Taiwan talking about my library's hitting the million eBook level and the hosts from EBSCO took me for a stroll down memory lane to a classic *xiaolongbao* restaurant in the capital city. While the buns we ate were not as good as those of my memories 40 years previous, some beautifully made with crab meat and golden crab roe, they were none the less terrific and hundreds of Taipei's local and tourist residents seemed to agree. The sidewalk in front of the three or four story restaurant was teeming with expectant diners who would queue up to get a photocopied list of choices and an order form. Once filled out you are given a number which is later announced over a speaker for all to hear so you know it is time to be taken to your table to feast upon your choices. But as we sat on small four legged stools on the sidewalk sheltered from heat and rain by the part of the building waiting for our number to be called, **Paul Poon** who directs an academic library in Macau — a small former Portuguese colony located just opposite Hong Kong on our stretch of the South China coast — and I reflected on why this restaurant was so popular and what could we as librarians learn from their example?

We could of course offer good food at a good price but our universities would soon get rid of the books and computers in order to create more space for the restaurant. In a recent focus group meeting to gather ideas for the construction of a learn-

ing commons on our campus, a group of students all concurred it should be like a huge **Starbucks**: comfortable chairs arranged in a chummy atmosphere; tables for snacks, drinks, and laptops; wireless access and power; and a central location where you can hang out with friends to see and be seen, and good food/drinks with an educational discount. I think what **Paul** and I concluded, although serious talk soon changed to serious eating, was this restaurant gave the people what they wanted quickly, efficiently, and with great enthusiasm. Now at last we have arrived at the topic of this **Backtalk**: Quality Service. Yet, like the American slogan "where's the beef," excellent service without content is noise.

Sometimes I get the feeling that our current passion for measuring service quality forgets that people also want content. Of course we all know that many/most (?) of our patrons come for the atmosphere, to study, to look at and be seen by other people, to find their friends, to be findable, etc. But our only justifiable excuse for continued existence is to provide the beef, the buns, and the content that is needed/craved. That is why the Web is valued so much. You type words like *xiaolongbao* in a small **Google** or **Yahoo!** box and you get information about these small buns, you are linked to lists or chat rooms where people are talking about them, you get pictures of them. Yes, you also get advertising but we have all been trained during thousands of hours of TV as children to ignore ads (even in 1950's Idaho we had advertisements between our mix of Agriculture Department films and Crusader Rabbit episodes). How can we ensure that our libraries (the physical places and the virtual places where our expensive databases, e-journals, and eBooks are kept) are equally rewarding? But that is the hard question. Since I have already exceeded my 1,000 word count I think I will go into the kitchen, push our Filipina cook out of the way and cook some hash browns, over easy eggs, toast and hot chocolate to eat while watching the **CBS** evening news that appears on TV here each morning on our side of the earth. I will let you all think about how to give our users what they want quickly, efficiently, and with great enthusiasm. Bon appétit/ sihk faahn!

PS Unless this column gets yanked, I may return with food/service memories of Bergdorf's in Chicago, the Capital Deli in New York, and the Peking Garden in Seattle. 

