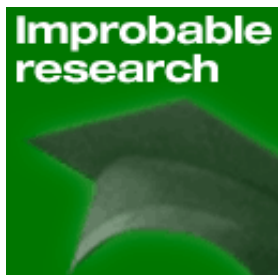


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Improbable research

## Eats, reads and leaves

The study of library cafes comes to fruition

**Marc Abrahams**  
Tuesday January 22, 2008[The Guardian](#)

Until recently, no one knew how much fruit changes hands in a typical library. Or at least, no one was telling. Thankfully, the de facto information embargo is now lifted. Anyone who is willing to shell out £38 can find out by obtaining a copy of a report called The Survey of Library Cafes.

The researchers, from the generically named, New York City-based Primary Research Group, obtained data from about 40 libraries in the United States. These ranged from the large and well-known (such as the University of Texas at Arlington's library) to the smaller and specialised (University Of Detroit Mercy Dental Library) to the obscure (Gogebic Community College Library).

The report serves up statistical information about popular library-cafe comestibles - coffee, sandwiches, salads, and even a catch-all category called "junk food". As a bonus, in this era when institutions are clamouring for surveillance and protection, there's a special section called "Policies to Protect the Library from Food."

The crowd-pleasing highlight is a section called "Mean, Median, Minimum and Maximum of Percentage of Total Revenues of the Library Cafe or Restaurant Accounted for by Sales of Fruit, Broken Out by Number of Annual Visitors to the Library."

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TO THE LIBRARY .

Trade secrets are disclosed here. We learn that approximately 1.42% of total revenues of a typical library cafe or restaurant are accounted for by sales of fruit. But in some library cafes it can be more than triple that. In others, especially in cafes that do not sell fruit, it is less.

The report overflows with such details. We learn that no library - at least none that were surveyed - manages to haul in more than 5% of its revenues through fruit, and that libraries that have fewer than 250,000 visitors a year get no revenue at all from fruit. At least not the libraries that took part in the survey. At least not if they answered the survey honestly.

Libraries that have between 250,000 and 600,000 annual visitors pull in, on average, a full one-hundredth of their cafe revenue from fruit. For bigger libraries, the story is dramatically different. In their cafes, fruit hauls in a hefty 3% of the total revenue. And though it sounds bananas, a few of these mammoth libraries have even managed to boost the percentage of cafe revenue derived from sales of fruit to a ripe, juicy 5%.

At least two UK libraries - the University of Aberdeen's Queen Mother Library and the Imperial College London Library - own copies of The Survey of Library Cafes that they make available to patrons. One can spend a delightful afternoon at either institution munching simultaneously on a crisp apple and a fresh copy of The Survey of Library Cafes.

(Thanks to Adrian Smith, who labours, sometimes fruitlessly, at the University of Leeds's Edward Boyle Library, which does not have a cafe and does not sell fruit, for bringing this report to my attention.)

· Marc Abrahams is editor of the bimonthly Annals of Improbable Research and organiser of the Ig Nobel Prize

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