Snacks in the Stacks

Food and Drink in North American Libraries

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Abstract

Libraries have traditionally forbidden most—or all—food and beverages for reasons relating to preservation and conservation. Given reasons typically include the need to discourage the presence of insects and other vermin, as well as the prevention of direct damage to library materials through contact to food and drink. For libraries with circulating collections, however, changes in societal norms and attitudes towards both food and drink in public places and the role of the library as a social and community place have caused challenges and led some library policies to adopt more permissive rules in this area. The middle ground is not easy to determine, but clear rules and a recognition of the changes in societal expectations can help library administrations form policies that both maximize protection while also allowing patrons the freedom of behaviour that they have come to expect in public places. This paper examines some general rules and the reasons for those rules from the perspective of preservation and conservation, the changes in some library policies on the subject and possible reasons for these changes, and suggestions for libraries seeking to update their policies in this area.

Keywords: Food, beverages, library food and beverage policies, public libraries, academic libraries, library rules and regulations

When examining the issue of food and drink in libraries from a strictly preservation and/or conservation perspective, the answer is clear: library rules and policies should strictly forbid the presence and consumption of most, if not all, food and beverages in a library setting. These rules and policies seek to discourage the presence of insects and other vermin and the damage they cause, as well as to prevent direct damage to library materials through contact to food and drink. In a perfect world, or in a library bent solely on preservation and/or conservation, these rules would be enforced in order to ensure that these issues of damage and destruction would be avoided at all costs. This is the case in an archives or rare book library where restrictions on food and drink are strict, and where
the rules are more likely to be respected by patrons due to the often unique nature of the material at hand. For items in circulating collections, however, the focus is on personal use, and there is a certain degree of questioning and challenging of these rules, particularly in the past 15-20 years, as changes in societal norms and attitudes towards the library as a social and community place have influenced some library policies and these rules regarding food and drink have begun to change and become more liberalized and permissive. This paper examines some general rules and the reasons for those rules from a preservation and/or conservation point of view, the changes in some library policies on the subject and possible reasons for these changes, and suggestions for libraries seeking to update their policies in this area.

**Restriction of Food and Drink**

Eating and drinking in library environments has long been considered a menacing act; libraries have defended their restriction of these activities by invoking the maxim that food will attract pests, and pests will damage books (Woodward, 2005, p. 194). The more graphic the examples given, the stronger the case for for these rules and restrictions. See, for example, text from a University of Michigan Library Preservation Office Flyer:

The presence of food and drink in the library environment creates serious housekeeping problems. Food, even when consumed carefully and neatly, can be left behind in the form of crumbs. Those particles, dropped on carpets or desks, become a staple source of food for insects and rodents. Spilled liquids, too, serve as important life support systems for a variety of organisms.

[...]

Other common problems associated with food and drink in the library environment are:

1. Cans or cups set on books, often leaving damaging stains and residues which are then easily transferrable to other materials;
2. Chunks of food smashed inside books, obliterating text, damaging paper, encouraging mold growth;
3. Warping and waffling of volumes which have been victims of spillage;
4. Fingerprints on covers and pages, evidence of transferred grease, dirt or even chocolate covered peanuts. (“Preservation Flyer No. 5: Food And Drink,” as in Darling, 1987, p. 129)

These examples, as graphic and dramatic as they may be, are in fact all dangers to library materials. In an archive or rare book library, strict rules forbidding food and drink are both the expectation and the norm. Since items in these special collections are often unique or old, the need to protect items and the reasons for these restrictions are generally understood and respected, though as we shall see, there may be less understanding in unrestricted areas of the library.
Outside of archives or rare book areas where food and drink are restricted, there are two main methods of protecting the building or library space and items in the collection from the possible consequences of exposure to food and drink and their inherent dangers while in the collection: housekeeping practices and pest management within the library facility. For the overall care of the library building and furnishings, the importance of good housekeeping practices and of vigilant pest control cannot be overstated. The integrated pest management strategy at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign notes that:

[Areas where food is allowed [...] should have a regular cleaning schedule to help reduce the risk of invertebrate pest infestation and garbage receptacles should be tightly sealed and removed daily to remove food sources for pests. (University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, n.d.)

Libraries that allow food and drink more liberally may find a need to increase the number of garbage receptacles and ensure that those responsible for building cleaning and maintenance empty these on a regular basis. Spills should be cleaned up as quickly and as thoroughly as possible in order to avoid attracting insect attention. Even libraries that do not allow food and drink should have pest management as a necessary part of library operations and budgeting, as well as an understanding that although there is no realistic way to eliminate insect activity entirely, it is more of a threat to the collection to have a large destructive population of pests. (University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, n.d.).

The major pests of library and archives include silverfish and firebrats, so-called “bookworms,” cockroaches, psocids or booklice, carpet beetles, clothes moths, termites, mice, rats, and molds and mildew, as listed in Parker (1988, p. iii). The damage these pests can do varies by type and species, and though many of the above-mentioned pests do not feed specifically on paper, library materials contain substances which do attract and nourish them (Parker, 1988, p. 7). One way to deal with insect and pest infestations in libraries is with the application of synthetic pesticides, but enthusiasm for this method has declined over time as the adverse health effects of these chemicals on humans were discovered (Parker, 1988, p. 4-5).

Generally speaking there has been a move away from the application of harsh chemicals, and a growing emphasis on monitoring, inspecting, and surveilling libraries and collections as a part of ‘integrated pest management.’ This approach directs libraries to determine what they consider acceptable parameters for pests, then managing the library site to keep pests from violating those parameters (McBane Mulford & Himmel, 2010, p. 106). Vigilance in monitoring is needed on the part of staff, and the more cooperation that can be had from patrons, the better. Larger libraries may find they have more problems than smaller ones; the sheer volume of patrons may escalate the issue even if monitoring is meticulous (Richards & Lister, 1991, p. 42). The University of Nebraska Omaha found
that loosening their restrictions on food and drink in the library did not lead to an increase in the pest control budget since there was already a large volume of food and drink in the building and the pest management services were already quite comprehensive (Davis & Boyer, 1996). Once libraries accept that a completely pest-free environment is not a realistic goal, creation of clearly defined strategies of monitoring, implementing, and enforcing of housekeeping rules can help mediate the risks posed by pests.

**Culture Shift - Library as a Social and Community Place**

Library policies created in the mid-to-late twentieth century came from a more formal time that most would agree has been left behind. Although traditionally food has been forbidden in libraries, “now, in the more relaxed, unencumbered age in which we live traditional library customs and practices once held sacrosanct are being re-evaluated” (Pierce, 1997). Lyons (2000) argues that there has been a shift towards a business-casual culture. If we agree, then we can re-examine library policies through the lens of this more casual culture, and potentially invalidate the idea that “libraries are considered places where authority controls the environment and where students are expected to defer to that authority” (Williams, 2008, p. 6). A large part of this shift to a business-casual attitude can be attributed the rise of coffee culture and the ubiquitous nature of portable reusable water bottles. Administrators of research libraries with more liberalized food and drink policies noted in a 1998 survey that loosening their restrictions was more or less conceding to these shifting cultural norms, with reference to the growing popularity of reusable water bottles (Soete, 1998, p. i). There are many discussions in library literature about the library as place. Some argue that by creating and enforcing very restrictive food and drink policies, libraries are making themselves seem unwelcoming. Markgren (2008) argues that “[b]y putting up signs that start with ‘NO’ [libraries] are pushing patrons out the door, patrons who might feel more comfortable at the local bookstore or campus computer lab where, it may appear, they are less restricted” (p. 53). Libraries with circulating collections are also at a disadvantage in that patrons are able to take books out of the library to that local bookstore or computer lab, or to their own home, where no such restrictions exist. Woodward (2005) argues that although much of our activity has shifted to an online environment, “a large part of our identities lies simply in being in a place” (p. 195). Any library that wishes to be a destination for its users should be inviting and enjoyable (Woodward, 2005, p. 195), and allowing creature comforts such as access to food and drink is one way to be a welcoming place.

There have also been many discussions about whether or not libraries should serve food in order to compete with the now-commonplace bookstore-café (Lyons, 2000, p. 338). The rise in both the number and popularity of these places have created an expectation of access to food and reading material for many patrons. In a survey about food and drink policies in academic libraries, cultural changes were mentioned as having a major effect on library policy, and some respondents specifically cited bookstores and other shops where customers are encouraged to interact with store stock and a
beverage (Soete, 1998, p. ii). If libraries want to meet the expectation of combining food and reading material to create a more welcoming environment for patrons, they need to overcome the impression of the library as a sterile and uninviting place (Williams, 2008, p. 7).

Creating this welcoming environment is particularly important in academic libraries, as their patrons often spend many hours a day researching, writing, and studying; recognition of the need of the body for fuel in the form of food and drink shows an understanding of the patron’s needs. The library, often considered the intellectual centre of the campus, must attract patrons by meeting the needs of their users as the users themselves define those needs; this may mean providing access to food (Williams, 2008, p. 7). Todaro (2014) argues that there has been a paradigm shift and that patrons are used to having drink and food throughout previously restricted environments such as bookstores, boutiques, academic environments, and around technology. Therefore, given relaxed standards in both public and private environments, [patrons] not only seek the right to bring in drink and food but also expect many environments to provide access to (for sale, donation) drink and food. (p. 162)

Some academic libraries are embracing the idea of food and drink in the library space. Cleveland State created an area called the ‘Connection Lounge,’ which attempts to provide a space reminiscent of a coffee shop, welcoming to computer users and coffee drinkers (Thornton, Jeppesen & Lupone, 2008, p. 198), and the University of Toledo planned a cyber café lounge that they hoped would create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere conducive to conversation and social interaction, which are seen as part of the learning process (Phillips & Hickam, 2008, p. 221). Davis and Boyer (1996) note the importance of recognizing that:

Students with little time to spare have found the need to carry nourishment with them and consume it while doing their work in the library. Traditional bans on food and drink consumption in academic libraries are gradually giving way in some institutions to more tolerant policies and practices. (n.p.)

An example of these more tolerant policies and practices is an online post by McMaster University Library. The reasoning behind their decision to allow food and drink in many areas of their libraries was “to make our users’ lives easier. We thought that people should not be forced to get up and leave the building, interrupting their study time, just to eat a snack” (“Tell Us What You Think”, n.d.). The University of Oregon Food & Drink Brainstorming Group (as in Soete, 1998) noted that “making students feel welcome [and] maintaining a tight food & drink policy are not mutually exclusive but does present a serious challenge” and noted that “many students already find the library system intimidating”
(p. 31), showing their understanding that restrictive policies may add to student unease or feeling that they are unwelcome in the library facility. The group also noted that changes in societal trends were reflected in the food- and drink-related activities of their patrons (p. 31). Academic libraries that do not allow patrons to eat and drink in their unrestricted areas may find that patrons go elsewhere (to a public library, a bookstore, or another place on campus) in order to be able to eat and drink while they work and that increased online access meant that college and university students were able to access resources (ebooks, chat reference services, etc.) from almost anywhere (Williams, 2008, p. 7). This means that students are not tethered to a particular location to do their work and could jeopardize the library as a study space on campus, since so many alternatives exist. If academic libraries want to remain—or become—a first-choice place of study and gathering for their patrons, they need to understand the needs of these patrons. In academic libraries in particular, argue Gardner and Eng (2005), these patrons are generally younger people who:

> demand access to information 24/7 [and] use the library at all hours of the night. If academic libraries are to continue as the primary hub of learning on campus, they will need to have facilities accessible at all times in order to adequately support student education. These facilities also now include the expectation of food services in the libraries. Besides the fact that students want food and drink in the library for convenience sake, there is the argument that we are making the library a more social, hands-on space. (p. 416)

A sampling of academic library policies on food and drink dating from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s show that the rules and policies of most libraries on the subject of food and drink on library premises were generally strict and uncompromising.¹ Members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), when surveyed in the late 1990s, found that there was a shift towards a more permissive approach to food and drink (Soete, 1998, p. 1). Some ARL library administrators admitted in that survey that problems blamed on food and drink such as damage to materials, pests, etc. were minimal; they also suggested that these problems might be outweighed by increased user convenience and a rise in positive public relations for allowing eating and drinking in the library (Soete, 1998, p. 1). The same conclusion was reached in a 2000 survey of public library directors; that survey found that libraries with restrictive policies expected to have many more problems than those of libraries with permissive policies (Lyons, 2000, p. 338). The main concerns noted by respondents to that survey included possible damage to carpet, computer equipment, library materials, and issues with garbage in the library (Lyons, 2000, p. 339). In general, there is an acknowledgement of the near impossibility

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¹In the original paper, an Appendix was included which compared policies noted in the 1998 survey document with the current policies of those libraries as on the libraries’ websites at the time of writing. It is available by contacting the author.
of keeping books and food apart without resorting to hermetically sealed environments (Woodward, 2005, p. 196), which is not a realistic option for most, if not all, circulating collections.

Benefits of allowing food and/or drink include an improvement in the library’s image, making the library more inviting, making patrons more comfortable, and meeting changing expectations of the freedom to eat and drink in public places (Lyons, 2000, p. 342). Other reasons to loosen restrictions around food and drink might include user convenience, the aforementioned positive public relations angle, difficulty in enforcement, and the recognition and acknowledgement recognition that libraries cannot control actions of users and their treatment of library materials outside the library building (Soete, 1998, p. 6). This last point is particularly important, as it illustrates a clear double standard for both public libraries and academic libraries with circulating collections: even if restrictions are imposed in the library building, there is no way for library staff to control the behaviour of users around library materials once those materials have been checked out (Richards & Lister, 1991 p. 45). Patrons may understandably question the restrictions on food and drink in the library when they are using the library as study, research, or reading space and intend to take the items home with them where they can eat or drink near the material as much as they like. It is important to note that strict food and drink policies stem from a time when public libraries were reading rooms and not lending institutions; lending is a more modern library practice (Woodward, 2005, p. 195). Another double standard that may frustrate patrons is learning or observing that library staff members are not held to the same rules governing food and drink as patrons are. In 1998, over 70% of the ARL libraries surveyed noted that they had different food- and drink-related policies and practices for staff than they did for patrons (Soete, 1998, p. i). These double standards are also highlighted by the rising popularity of the bookstore cafe. The difference between libraries and bookstores is that although bookstores are as concerned as libraries about potential damages to their inventory, a bookstore’s priority is to keep customers in the store longer and to encourage them to buy more; in that sense, integrating cafés into the bookstore has helped (Woodward, 2005, p. 195). Libraries, with a more limited stock and more limited sources of income, have more at stake in terms of damaged or unusable items. If libraries wish to emulate the bookstore model and have as a goal enticing patrons to stay longer in the facility, allowing food and drink or even serving it on the premises is a possible way to achieve this goal. In an interview about a new coffee cafe in the Toronto Reference Library, one interviewee said: “It has to become a place of leisure again [...] [b]ooks aren’t enough anymore” (Wahl as quoted in Stone, 2012).

**Difficulty of Enforcement**

Perhaps one of the factors that leads more directly to a loosening of restrictions is that of the challenge of enforcement. In general it is difficult to monitor consumption of food within the library, and monitoring and enforcing strict policies can create conflict between staff and patrons (Cravey, 2001, p. 58). Richards and Lister (1991) mention possible approaches to address the issue, including “warnings and fine notices, [...] paid students to monitor food/drink consumption, with elaborate
systems of written warnings” (p. 43). In Soete's (1998) survey of research libraries, the challenge of enforcing strict policies was mentioned as part of the reason for loosening the policies themselves, and respondents acknowledged that very strict rules were “not worth the extreme effort required for enforcement” (p. i) and that not all staff agreed with or were willing to enforce strict food and drink regulations. The respondents also noted that the large size of many ARL libraries made it very difficult to surveil and monitor patron behaviour (Soete, 1998, p. ii). There may also be a mistaken or over-exaggerated perception of damage from food and drink, which leads to reluctance in relaxing food and drink policies. Richards and Lister (1991) found that the presumption of destruction was overstated:

How much damage actually occurs because of food and drink, or do librarians just presume it is destructive? Larger libraries [surveyed] perceive pop cans and candy wrappers as formidable problems; smaller libraries seem not to be as concerned. The sheer volume of patron traffic, and trash generated, must contribute to this difference in concern, so perhaps the real issue is the presence of unsightly litter, not the damage food/drink cause to Materials. (p. 44)

A survey of 29 libraries that had either a café, mobile food carts, and/or vending machines found that just over 20 percent of the survey participants said the presence of food in the library led to higher cleaning costs (Primary Research Group, 2012, p. 25). The same survey also found that no libraries with under 100,000 annual visitors cited an actual increase, but over 40 percent of libraries with annual visitors of 100,000 to 499,999 visitors did (p. 25). This may imply that the volume of visitors, and not their food consumption, is responsible for the elevated facility cleaning costs. The same survey found that a quarter of survey respondents, all academic libraries, felt that having food in the library led to higher costs in décor- and/or furniture-related costs but no evidence was presented in the survey documentation to indicate that these feelings were an accurate reflection of the situation (Primary Research Group, 2012, p. 25). It was also unclear if the reason for the rise in costs was due to increased housekeeping/janitorial services that were implemented to deal with a higher volume of library patrons attributable to the introduction of cafés, mobile food carts, or vending machines, or if the respondents' feelings about higher furniture costs were legitimate.

Suggestions for Libraries Wishing to Re-examine Their Food and Drink Policies

Unless the library is willing to pay for staff time to be spent searching bags and pockets as patrons enter the facility, and since that may present issues in terms of patron privacy, it may be best to accept that a more useful practice is determining how best to focus efforts and finances (Soete, 1998, p. ii). Survey respondents in Gardner and Eng's (2005) research suggested that instead of attempting total food and drink restrictions, "less drastic steps such as [allowing] covered beverages or snack vending
machines in designated locations only” (p. 416) were likely to be more accepted by patrons.

In Weaver-Meyers and Ramsey (1990), at least one academic library reported that library exhibits illustrating possible pest problems and concerns about the preservation of library materials seemed to encourage patrons to be more mindful of their garbage, but that the changes were only temporary (p. 537). The library then attempted to control food and drink consumption by having changes made to the student code that made violating the library’s food and drink policy a citable offense and then issuing citations and fines, following that model of the university’s housing authorities (Weaver-Meyers & Ramsey, 1990, p. 537). Weaver-Meyers and Ramsey (1990) note that the results of the campaign were generally successful, in that student security morale was raised and the amount of trash was reduced (p. 538).

Prompt and effective janitorial services are also an important measure in addressing issues of waste stemming from food and drink, and it is essential that the library administration understand that allowing food and drink will of necessity lead to increased janitorial costs. When patrons see that others have left trash or otherwise disrespected the space, they may be more inclined to act in the same way. More frequent housekeeping can help keep a space clean and can help libraries achieve the goal of having more relaxed food and drink policies (Woodward, 2009, p. 60).

As well, libraries may attempt to limit food and drink to non-collection areas or open spaces such as reading or study areas and restrict it in stack areas; treating it as an area-specific rule rather than as a blanket denial may help to encourage patron compliance. Library administrators would also do well to attempt to understand the needs of their patrons in the space available. Segregating special collections such as archives or other restricted-access materials in order to more easily separate those spaces with items that need more protection from other spaces where food can be allowed is another strategy that can be employed (Woodward, 2005, p. 197).

Signage explaining the reasons for food and drink policies, and the need to avoid the attraction of insects and vermin, may also help. Clements and Scott (1994) describe one academic library that created a written code of conduct that they had not previously had, and then created educational posters to explain the possible dangers and potential damage due to food and drink in the library (p. 81), and mounted an exhibit called “Trashing the Libraries: The Preservation Problem” (p. 82). The conclusion was that the posters and exhibit helped to improve the situation to some degree but that it was more difficult to achieve cooperation from patrons when they were not in areas where staff were visible (Clements & Scott, 1994, p. 82). This particular library found that having written policies in a brochure made enforcement more effective and made interactions with offenders more positive (Clements & Scott, 1994, p. 82). Since signage alone does not change behaviour (Clements & Scott, 1994, p. 82) it is important to have a multi-dimensional approach to food and drink policies that takes into account user needs, the realities of the space, commitment to enforcement, and budgetary support for increased janitorial services.

If signage is used it should be clear and the rules it outlines should be easy to follow. Unclear rules
and rules open to interpretation by patrons and staff can be problematic. For example, the following food and drink policy is currently in place at an academic library in Toronto:

The Library allows food and drink within the restrictions outlined below.

Acceptable:
- Snack foods that do not disturb those around you
- Drinks in spill-proof containers

Non-acceptable:
- Food that is aromatic or messy (pizza, fries, pasta etc.)
- Open drink containers
- Meals

Please be considerate, and use appropriate trash receptacles to clean up after yourself.

Note: library staff reserve the right to determine which food and drink items are permitted in the Library. (University of Toronto Scarborough, n.d.)

As written, this policy creates many loopholes and raises more questions than it answers, such as ‘What constitutes a meal and differentiates it from a snack?’, ‘How is it determined what food bothers those around a patron?’, and ‘Who decides what is aromatic or messy?’ Allowing individual library staff members to determine what is permitted on a case-by-case basis could cause inconsistency in enforcement and lead to anger and resentment when not all situations are treated equally. One library participating in the 1998 survey about food and drink policies noted that their university counsel had concerns about the physical safety of staff if they were asked to enforce food and drink policies (Soete, 1998, p. i-ii).

Some library administrators surveyed found it more effective to address food and drink at the entrance to the library with signs and staff presence instead of trying to implement building-wide monitoring (Soete, 1998, p. ii) and that having more permissive policies such as allowing beverages in covered or closed containers instead of trying to restrict all beverages, was a more successful strategy (Soete, 1998, p. ii).

**Conclusion**

It is easy to agree that from a strictly preservation and/or conservation perspective, library rules and policies should firmly forbid the presence and consumption of food and beverages in a library setting. These rules are necessary in order to protect materials and prevent damage and to discourage insects, pests, and vermin in the library. In special collections and archives or in areas of the library with separate entrances and a clear delineation of space, these rules are easier to enforce as patrons recognize the unique or rare nature of items in that collection. However, libraries with circulating collections will generally find these restrictive rules questioned, challenged, and contravened by patrons.
as changes in societal norms and attitudes towards the library as a social and community place and towards food and drink in public places have become more liberalized. There is no easily-found middle ground, but clear rules and a recognition of the changes in expectations and permissiveness (for water bottles, etc.) can help library administrations to form policies that both maximize protection of the materials and the library environment while allowing patrons the freedom of behaviour which they have come to expect in public places.

References


