



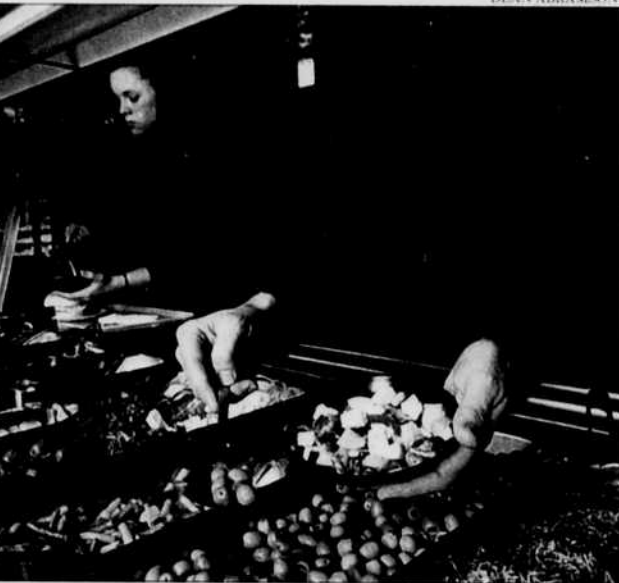
PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER R. HARRIS

ligent and sophisticated consumers, they've grown up eating out. You're seeing what we call the 'marketplace' or retail format now, because that's what they want."

In an era of ever-tightening budgets, many colleges turn to contract companies because they offer the chance to make some money in the dining hall. A school can negotiate for renovations in the cafeterias as well as for a percentage of the profits from food sales. But contract companies increasingly earn their profits not just through professional management and economies of scale but by introducing commercial tie-ins. ARA, for example, in effect sells advertising space in the cafeteria. "We use all the devices that the fast-food people would use or the packaged-food people would use," says ARA's Tony Wilson. "If you buy a large Itza Pizza and a Coke, you get a plastic visor with a Coke logo. That's

Salad days: *Bellying up to the veggie bar at Bowdoin*

DEAN ABRAMSON



Jumbo gumbo: *Cooking up a batch of seafood, Creole style, at Tulane (left), the New Orleans dish ready to be served*



just a simple promotion, but we have dozens of them." Indeed they do: their Bagel Wagons promote Kraft cream cheese, their Gretel's Bake Shops promote General Mills and so on. ARA's student-union cafeteria at New York University is a forest of brand names.

Schools that run their own food services aren't immune from commercialization either: many are arranging for such fast-food franchises as Burger King, Arby's or Pizza Hut to open right on campus, so that student dollars will stay with them. It's the American

way, but it raises the dispiriting prospect of campuses so well adapted to the mass market that they become as plastic and indistinguishable as airports.

So how's the food? Getting better, in many cases, but complaints are still rampant. Northwestern junior Molly Barber says she lost 20 pounds last year eating Saga/Marriott cuisine, despite the company's efforts to tempt her with fruit bars and bagel bars. Students claim that the scrambled eggs have a greenish tinge; some say they won't eat anything but ice cream, salad and Cap'n Crunch. Johns Hopkins recently switched from ARA to the Seiler Corp., after ARA helped the Terrace Room cafeteria earn its nickname "the Terror Room." Students report considerable upgrading of the food and the disappearance of the notorious "pinto bean loaf"—allegedly served for up to three days in a row in the bad old days. Still, the applause isn't exactly deafening. "Cardboard would taste a thousand percent better," says freshman Bonnie Hodes.

Murderers' Row: On other campuses, however, contract companies have scored higher. Three years ago at the University of Houston, vice president for student affairs Paul Moore set about luring the school's 30,000 commuters away from a fast-food strip known locally as "Murderers' Row." ARA was awarded the contract and since then has renovated the cafeterias, installed "concepts" ranging from Mexican food to an ice-cream parlor and opened Reflections, a restaurant where students can experience the novelty of being waited on at table by someone other than Mother. "The biggest thing they've done is allow us to eat nearly anywhere on campus with our board cards," says senior Mark Lacy. "It's pretty easy to find a legitimate meal now."

Saga/Marriott arrived on the Wellesley campus last fall to universal disfavor: traditionally students helped themselves in the cafeteria, so the company's policy of having employees serve the food led to long lines at every meal. In addition, the company miscalculated how much young women really eat, resulting in spot food shortages. Soon one of the colorful rumors that plague contract companies sprang up: Wellesley was receiving Saga/Marriott's prison fare rather than its college program. (The same rumor has been reported at campuses all over the country; it's apocryphal.) Once the initial problems were cleared up, however, students agreed that on the whole the switch was positive. A fresh, appealing salad bar and an eminently straightforward quiche were offered at a recent dinner, along with a well-made though wholly unseasoned minestrone.

Self-operated food services can be somewhat more person-