

# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## SURVEYING THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS AT ROCKEFELLER

MANUEL CASTELLANO-MUÑOZ

Who has never complained about his or her PI? Complaining about one's boss is sometimes so common as to be an ordinary part of one's behavior at work. Yet, we have to admit, we are not always completely fair in doing so. Of course things could be better. The question is: how bad are things?

*Natural Selections* conducted a survey asking the students and postdocs at Rockefeller to identify what they like or dislike about their PIs, and how happy they are in their respective lab environment. The respondents were asked to rate and give their opinions about different aspects of being a PI, from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Since not all the questions were expected to be equally important for every individual, they were also asked to rate how important each question was for them, from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 5 (extremely important). Whether the PI's name was disclosed or not was a choice left to the respondents.

### 1. Students

A total of 72 students, who have worked at Rockefeller for approximately two and half years on average, took part in this survey. A complete list of the result is shown in Table 1. It is remarkable that PIs scored 3.6 points on average, obtaining more than 3 points out of 5 in every single category, with the best results when it comes to "initiating ideas," "delegating responsibilities," "selling ideas or products," "helping in the publication process," and "spending enough time in the lab for the team." Moreover, most of the attributes with the worst scores matched those qualities the students considered less important. Exceptions to this are the attributes such as "selling ideas or products" (which seems to be irrelevant for students' benefit), "managing conflicts," and "guidance for future career decisions," which were far from the students' desired goals.

### 2. Postdocs

In addition to students, 80 postdocs participated in this survey. Postdocs, having worked at the university around two years



Figure 1. Average Satisfaction Ratings

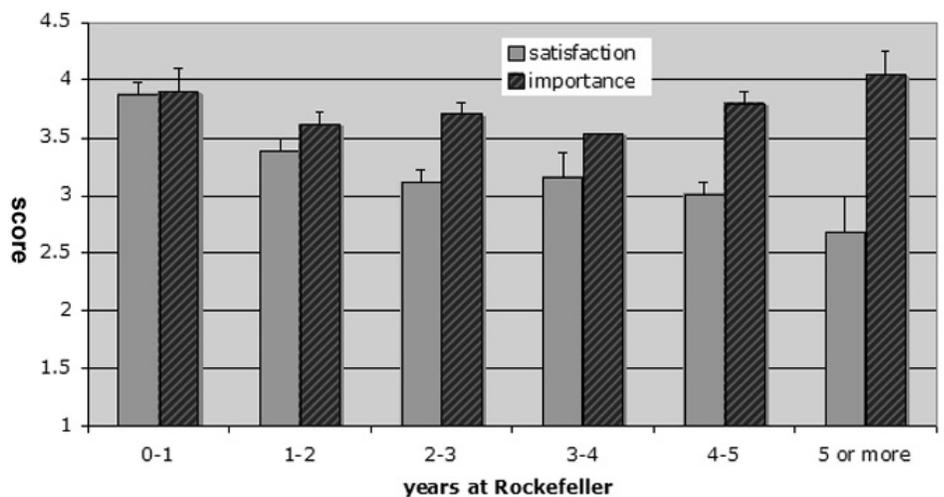


Figure 2. Ratings vs. time at RU

and seven months on average, rated their PIs as shown in Table 1. It is noteworthy that postdocs scored their PIs lower on the attributes they deemed important. "Instilling teamwork," "coaching," "counseling," "managing conflicts," and "guiding for future career decisions" were qualities that did not measure up to the importance attached by the postdocs.

### 3. Students versus postdocs

No conclusion can be drawn by just simple comparisons. However, the results from students and postdocs rating are worth a detailed analysis. Surprisingly, as shown in Figure 1, students' scores in all categories were

**Table 1. Survey Results**

PI Quality	Importance		Satisfaction	
	Postdocs	Students	Postdocs	Students
Helping in the publication process	4.6	4.5	3.7	3.8
Guiding for future career decisions	4.5	4.3	2.9	3.1
Initiating new ideas	3.9	4.3	3.6	4.2
Spending enough time in the lab for the team	3.7	4.4	3.2	3.9
Managing conflict	3.7	4.3	2.2	2.8
Counseling	3.7	3.8	2.7	3.5
Coaching	3.7	4.0	2.6	3.4
Instilling teamwork	3.6	3.8	2.3	3.5
Coordinating tasks	3.5	3.3	2.9	3.3
Selling ideas or products	3.4	3.2	4.0	4.3
Delegating responsibility	3.4	3.4	3.2	3.8
Handling details	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.2
Teaching	3.3	3.9	2.9	3.7
Decision making with others	3.3	3.6	3.2	3.7

*continued from page 1*

strikingly higher than those of postdocs. On the other hand, postdocs seemed to be a little less demanding than students—the relative importance of most attributes was lower for postdocs. Besides, 60% of postdocs disclosed their PI’s name, while only 42.5% of students did so.

**4. Time goes by**

The fact that PIs were better rated by their students than by their postdocs is not the only startling result in this survey. When we gathered the information from both students and postdocs in order to analyze their ratings depending on the years spent in the lab, it turned out that the longer they had stayed in the same research group, the poorer the scores were (Figure 2, bars=S.E.). As opposed to satisfaction, the importance scores did not change meaningfully over the years.

The lower rates found in students and postdocs who had spent longer than four years at the university could be due to many reasons. Aspects such as pressure to publish and the uncertainty of planning future career

steps are indeed motives that may only show up during the last years of work in the lab demanding PI’s advise and attention. In addition, it is not inconceivable that PIs divert attention from old projects after some years for the benefit of new scientific ideas, possibly causing unrest in older lab members.

The lower ratings given by veteran students and postdocs have been the most striking results in the survey. It is not easy to explain some of the contrasting scores given by students and postdocs. Although apparently essential features, “instilling team work” and “managing conflicts” were the two qualities in which PIs clearly failed their postdocs’ expectations. However, among all attributes, only these two fell below 50% of the maximum rating. Despite these few disapproving scores, we must acknowledge that PIs did quite well in the survey, especially when it came to students’ opinion. ☺

*Natural Selections wishes to thank the 152 students and postdocs for completing this survey and for their helpful feedback.*

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**Announcements:**

**SRC:**

Student Pugwash USA Launches Science Policy Election Guide for Young Voters. For details, go to the *Natural Selections* Web site.

Send the SRC your thoughts!  
src@rockefeller.edu

- Housing issues: Subject line, “Housing”
- Requested courses: Subject line, “More courses”
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**Natural Selections:**

*Natural Selections* mail box is now 287.

A new mural in the Bronx building will open to the community after April 4. The work and the artist, Coco144, were featured in *Natural Selections*’ March issue.

# Skeptics among Us

MATT SEKEDAT

It seems the word skepticism has taken on a new meaning in the past several years. I have heard it tossed about frequently of late, both in a positive and negative light. There are skeptical societies,<sup>1,2</sup> two skeptical magazines,<sup>3,4</sup> and many skeptical podcasts<sup>5</sup> and blogs,<sup>6,7</sup> all of which promote networking among skeptics and keep us informed about the latest bits of pseudoscience. Yet, the willingness to believe the improbable remains a constant in our society, and the credulous often frown upon skeptical people. So, what does skepticism really mean, and how does it help us as scientists and as humans?

Scientists are admirable skeptics when it comes to science since we learn early on how to think critically about the research that makes its way across our desks. This does not mean that we assume everything to be false until it has been definitively proven—irrefutable evidence is exceedingly rare. Instead, we let the scientific method guide us. It is a blueprint for designing experiments, but it also helps us to analyze the validity of experiments performed by others. We begin by asking what is the proposed hypothesis, and then decide if the presented data agrees with it. Agreeable data does not prove a hypothesis—it merely supports it, and we must look deeper to determine how well-supported it is. Were the proper control experiments performed? Does previous research offer more evidence? If these conditions are met, one should still hold out for the possibility that contrary evidence may some day come along. Therefore, our conclusions are always pending further experiments, and repeatability is often critical for scientific ideas to gain a foothold in the community.

Not all evidence is created equal. One well-designed experiment outweighs any number of poorly planned studies. Frequently, a paper is published that finds one reasonable conclusion, only to have it contradicted by a later report. In these cases, we weigh the evidence from each study and conclude, in our own minds, which is likely to be true. These debates are rarely cut and dry, but in all cases the correct theory eventually floats to the top, so long as the scientific method is properly carried out. This is because it is based on logic and reason. Critical thinking is like a sieve for the truth. Sometimes it takes years, decades, or centuries, but the correct answer will always endure, while conclusions from poorly designed studies and flawed rea-

soning should eventually be filtered out.

This works for scientists because we assume that an explanation exists for every observation that we make. In some cases the explanation may be forever out of our reach, but we still assume that one is there. Logically, we must make this assumption or there is no point in experimenting at all.

For some reason, this logic occasionally breaks down when we leave the realm of rigorous science. In our everyday lives we come across reports of unexplained phenomena, conspiracy theories tossed about by our friends, commercials for remedies that have no basis in medicine, and psychics clamoring to tell our fortunes or speak to our deceased relatives. As human beings we may be evolutionarily predisposed to believe in these notions, and our first reaction is usually to accept the premise. As scientists, we should avoid this and apply the same critical thinking skills that we use to assess the validity of research, and that is the heart of skepticism.

On the surface, the word skepticism seems to be purely negative—“you’re a skeptic? So... what? You don’t believe in anything?” Skeptics aren’t nihilists; it’s merely a convenient word that describes our appreciation for critical thinking, logic, and reason. We expect a scientific explanation for everything that we come across in the natural world. An important piece to skepticism, one that is often ignored, is that we must logically admit the possibility for every testable explanation to be true, no matter how unlikely it may be.

This is why the scientific method and skepticism are such elegant notions. We adapt our beliefs to fit the evidence. This may sound wishy-washy, but it is not. The alternative is to believe in something in the face of contrary evidence. This is the difference between a belief and an ideology—ideologues will never adjust their thinking. Blindly adhering to an ideology is never a good idea in science, and the same is true in our everyday lives. If the evidence shows that homeopathic cures have no effect on the common cold, then a skeptic is \$10 richer than someone who practices homeopathy by purchasing a \$10 dollar cure and no less likely to catch a cold.

There are many, many examples of occasions where we are justly served by skepticism, but I will not belabor this now. The main point I am hoping to get across is this: skepticism is a methodology that is firmly

based in science. Indeed, the most useful tool for a skeptic is one that is familiar to all scientists. Occam’s Razor states that the answer that makes the fewest assumptions is the most likely to be true.<sup>8</sup> It seems like such a simple notion, but there is a subtlety to it that we often overlook. At the heart of this principle is the use of evidence to determine the likelihood of a hypothesis. One thing is not inherently more likely than another—we subconsciously determine the likelihood upon weighing the strength of the evidence for both sides. For example, if a stranger walks up to you and correctly tells you in which city you were born, it is much more likely that it was a lucky guess (or cheating was involved) than that he has psychic powers. On the other hand, if he names the birthplaces of 20 randomly chosen people in a well-controlled situation, Occam switches sides and we must conclude that the most likely explanation is that this person is a bona fide psychic. Of course, such tests have been performed many times and the former conclusion holds firm.

This malleability of thinking shows that there is nothing inherently negative about skepticism; it is intrinsically objective. Unfortunately, skepticism is not a quality that we are born with, and objectivity is difficult for us to maintain. We scientists are armed with the ability to think critically when we are confronted with dubious scientific claims, but only because we have trained ourselves to do so. We still struggle with this in our non-scientific lives, and we must train equally hard to achieve it.

If this primer to skepticism has piqued your interest and you would like to learn more, feel free to contact me at [sekedam@rockefeller.edu](mailto:sekedam@rockefeller.edu), or visit the Web pages for The Skeptical Society, the New York City Skeptics, or any of the other sites listed below. ☺

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# Postdoc Perspective: Show Me the Money

NADIM SHOHDY AND PATRICK LUSK

This is our second article in the Postdoc Perspective Series that deals with the new challenges facing our generation of life scientists. The first article (Taking the “Alternative” out of Alternative Careers in Science, published in the November 2007 issue) discussed the evolution of new postdoc career options emerging as a result of the bleak academic job market and increased growth in industry. This month the focus is on the funding patterns of the National Institutes of Health vis-à-vis postdocs and faculty. Most of the data we draw on was compiled by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and can be found at [http://opa.faseb.org/pages/PolicyIssues/training\\_datappt.htm](http://opa.faseb.org/pages/PolicyIssues/training_datappt.htm).

First, let’s analyze the cold hard data. In 2006 the NIH spent approximately \$750 million, up from \$300 million in 1990 on Training Grants and Fellowships. The overall NIH budget has increased more dramatically, however, and the percentage of NIH funds dedicated for Training Grants and Fellowships has actually decreased from about 4.2% to 2.6%. As a case in point, when we examine the F32 postdoctoral fellowships (a.k.a the Ruth Kirchstein National Research Service Awards) the number of these awards granted were virtually unchanged from 1990 to 2006 leading to a drop in the average success rates from 42% in 1990 to 27% in 2006. In 1990, there were roughly 34,000 postdocs in the US supported by research grants, non-federal sources, traineeships or fellowships. In 2006, this number increased to about 56,000. Interestingly, the percentage of postdocs supported by research grants increased from 53% in 1990 to 57% in 2006, while the percentage of those supported by fellowships decreased from 7% to 5%. The above data reflects the increasing competitiveness for postdoctoral funding due to the excess of postdocs relative to the funding capacity of federal and non-federal sources.

Unfortunately, the funding situation for new PIs is also rather grim. Receiving your first Ro1 grant from the NIH, long known as the bedrock of a biomedical lab’s finances, is becoming increasingly difficult. Since 1995, the number of Ro1s awarded has been essentially flat despite a 42% increase in the funding of all research project grants. This suggests that

investigators must ameliorate the Ro1 deficiency by tapping into non-federal funding sources—often these funding sources are more likely to favor more experienced investigators over first-timers. As a consequence, more institutions might be hedging their bets by recruiting established PIs in favor of successful postdocs. This is reflected in data surveying US medical schools: although showing steady increases in total faculty since 1970, the percentage of first-time faculty has dropped from 13% in 1970, to 8% in 1990 and 3% in 2006. Most of the hiring increases have been in clinical departments and very little in basic science departments. Furthermore, due to the increasing length of the Ph.D. and postdoc, the average age of a first-time Ro1 investigator has increased from 36.7 years in 1970 to 43.3 in 2006!

After painting this increasingly bleak picture of federal funding in the US for postdocs and first time faculty, what, if anything, is being done to improve the situation? In a number of public statements, the NIH director has acknowledged the funding woes of our generation of postdocs. To address this issue, the NIH has introduced

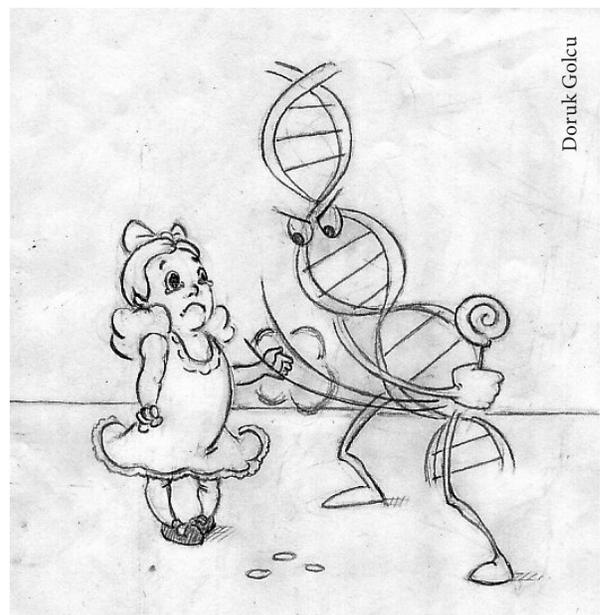
the Research Scholar Development Award (the K22), and more recently, the Pathway to Independence Award (the K99). These types of awards are often termed “bridging fellowships” as they provide funding to individuals at the end of their postdocs in addition to funds to start their own independent research in a faculty position. It is unfortunate to note that once the K99s were introduced, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund eliminated their prestigious bridging fellowships for Ph.D.s (not M.D.s). Furthermore, there have been sug-

gestions that new investigator grants get priority on grant panels, although nothing official has been put in place. Perhaps most interestingly, there is evidence that the apparent pessimism surrounding the current funding situation is not shared by institutions across the country. Despite the flattening budget landscape, the amount of institutional investments in research facilities over the last four years is almost double that of the prior four years (1998-2003). It is unclear whether such investments reflect a projected increase in tenure or non-tenure track positions.

So how can the situation be improved? While the K99 and K22 awards are helpful mechanisms to provide funding for early career scientists, there are few available relative to the large pool of applicants. However, a call to the government to provide greater funding to the NIH is not a sustainable solution, particularly with today’s economic realities. What is likely required is a dramatic reorganization of the infrastructure and institutional hierarchies that frame the scientific workforce today. How to achieve this and what form it might take remain unresolved. Any ideas? ☉

## SCIENCE DECONVOLUTED

*Happiness is controlled by your genes? A common misconception in the media*



Doruk Golcu

**Caught something?**

Submit your bad science headlines to *Natural Selections*



*This month, Natural Selections features Margarette Sheldon, Weiss Café Manager  
Country of Origin: USA*

## New York State of Mind

**1. How long have you been living in New York?** It's been almost six years now. I moved from northern California, where I was born and raised, to NYC in 2002, to attend the French Culinary Institute, then moved upstate to Hyde Park to earn my BPS in Hospitality Management from the Culinary Institute of America.

**2. Where do you live?** I just moved to the Bronx from Connecticut, where I lived after graduating college in May 2005.

**3. Which is your favorite neighborhood?** That's hard. It would have to be the lower East Side or the West Village.

**4. What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated?** Overrated: New York style pizza and cheesecake. Swear it tastes the same back home. Underrated: Mary Ann's on 8th & West 16th. Killer Margaritas, chips, and salsa. (Mexican food that is reminiscent of California's.)

**5. What do you miss most when you are out of town?** The subway. Really. I love to just jump on and get off at a station that I've never been to before and explore around. And the people watching in this city is truly amazing. I could spend all day doing that.

**6. If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be?** How rude New Yorkers can be. When I first moved out here, it took some time getting used to these facts. Simple things like saying hello or opening a door for a stranger was a social manner.

**7. Describe a perfect weekend in NYC.** That would have to consist of lots of shopping that I don't have to pay for. Clothes, shoes, one-of-a-kind jewelry, plants, local art, etc. Lunch at a little hole in the wall cafe with high quality food where I can sit outside and people watch and sip on really good coffee. Exploring through Central

Park by bike. Meandering all over the city's various neighborhoods and taking pictures. Appetizers, drinks, and dancing with friends at the latest lounge. Late, late, late cab ride home, the kind when you get out of the cab you feel like you just had the strangest experience. Finishing up the perfect night by sleeping in, waking up when I'm good and ready, not when my alarm decides it's time.

**8. What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC?** That would definitely have to be my first visit to the city, junior year of high school. The high school Wind Ensemble I was in traveled here from California to perform in Carnegie Hall.

**9. If you could live anywhere else, where would that be?** Back home in California, especially next to the beach.

**10. Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why?** I do now. It's particularly noticeable when I go home to visit. My friends say "you're so New York" and I stand out in the street when waiting to cross the road, instead of being on the sidewalk like the rest of the country. Also I noticed that I walk really fast now, too. My days of lazy relaxed California walking are over. ☺



## Green Corner: Recycling Changes on Campus

FELICE KELLY

Trash generation is one of the most visible signs of our personal environmental impact, so it's no surprise that many of you on campus are very concerned about the RU recycling program. In addition, the old recycling policy, mixing recyclables and landfill trash and sorting it just before sending it out, didn't seem to make a lot of sense. So, after discussions with the Green Task Force, the university has switched to collecting recycling separately from trash.

This change in policy means that you will need to sort what you throw away. Every floor should have blue and green bins for recycling. If you want your paper, plastic, etc., recycled, please put it in the appropriate recycling bin, and do not throw trash in there. The regulations about what can and cannot be recycled are the same as for home recycling. People have complained that the bins are too far away or that there are too few. One of the

reasons for placing the bins in hallways rather than in the lab space is to limit the chance of lab waste ending up in the recycling, which has been a problem in the past. It also simplifies collection. I understand that it is inconvenient to have to get up every time you have a piece of waste paper. One way to deal with this is to put a box near your desk for paper, and then empty it into the hallway bin once it is full. If your floor does not have recycling bins, or if bins in your hall are filling up too fast, you can contact Mary Raffloer at extension 8117.

Of course, recycling doesn't have to end with paper and plastics. Discussions are underway to have a recycling center on campus, where people could bring more unusual recyclables, such as unwanted electronics, fluorescent light bulbs, and plastic grocery bags. At present, gently used clothes can be dropped off at the Child and Family Center Thrift

Store collection room in Faculty House. Though the Green Task Force was enthusiastic about establishing a community compost heap, we've been firmly told that we don't have a good place for a large, rotting mound on such a compact campus.

A couple of other garbage notes: Reduce and reuse. As always, it's better not to print a document you won't read rather than printing and then recycling. Consider getting the ceramic plates, silverware, and a plastic tray if eating in at the cafeteria. We're open to other suggestions for how the campus community can reduce and recycle our waste. If you have suggestions or comments about green issues, particularly other things that you'd like to be able to recycle on campus, please email me (fkelly@rockefeller.edu) or Alex Kogan (kogana@rockefeller.edu), who coordinates plant operations and green issues. ☺

# David and Goliath: East Village Ramen Challenge

LEE KIANG

My primary association with ramen noodles is in the form of blocks of dehydrated noodles cooked in a hot pot in my college dorm room, a far cry from the original Japanese ramen, a dish of handmade noodles in broth. In Japan, ramen is a national passion with regional broth variations, so-called ramen otaku (“ramen geeks”) and even a ramen theme-park museum. In New York’s East Village, many establishments cater to the ramen-obsessed, and now a ramen noodle war is brewing between the David (David Chang, the chef-owner of Momofuku Noodle Bar, Momofuku Ssäm Bar and Momofuku Ko) and the Giant (the popular Setagaya Japanese ramen chain).

## Ramen Setagaya

Ramen: Entering Setagaya, you will feel that you’ve gone to Japan—most of the signage is in Japanese and the menu lists about five types of ramen that are all pretty much indistinguishable by description. Luckily, our waitress is helpful and recommends the least expensive option, shio ramen (\$9.50). A bowl of so-called “salt ramen” arrives, topped with two thin slices of grilled fatty pork, half a soft-cooked egg, black hijiki seaweed, house-preserved bamboo shoots, and a tangle of thinly slivered scallion. First, the broth: more savory, in the *umami*—the fifth taste—sense, than salty as the name would imply. Flavors of dried fish, clams, meat, kelp, and shiitake mushroom are melded together in a complex, briny, concentrated broth, which is seasoned with Vietnamese sun-dried sea salt and is boiled for six hours each morning. Noodles have a slight firmness akin to al dente, and taste richly of wheat and salt. Each topping complements the noodle soup, particularly the rich and smoky grilled pork and the fresh scallion with a delicate texture and as-



Ramen Setagaya

tringent bite. On a return visit, I would be curious to try the tsuke-men, in which thicker ramen noodles are served separately, to be dipped in broth before each bite. Besides ramen, Setagaya’s only other substantive offering is the fantastic gyoza dumplings (6 for \$4.50), grilled to a crisp on one of the three sides, to be dipped in a vinegary sauce.

Setting: No-frills fishbowl. Setagaya is more of a bar than a restaurant, with mostly Japanese patrons perched elbow to elbow on stools. The turnover is rapid. One glass wall faces First Avenue and another separates happily slurping patrons from a line of hungry customers waiting for a seat at the bar.

## Momofuku Noodle Bar

Ramen and more: Momofuku means lucky peach in Japanese, and was also the name of the man who invented the dehydrated noodle block of my college years for the Japanese company Nissin. Momofuku Noodle Bar is owned by Korean American chef David Chang whose cuisine fuses traditional Asian dishes with locally-sourced artisanal ingredients. Chang doesn’t claim his ramen is authentic, just

better than everyone else’s. He also loves pork, and he uses prized Berkshire pork, known in Japan as kurobuta or “black hog.” Anyone wary of eating a slab of pork fat should not venture past the threshold of Momofuku.

Here, we are recommended the most expensive ramen on the menu, “Momofuku ramen,” at \$15. It comes in a gigantic bowl with



Momofuku Noodle Bar

a hunk of fatty pork belly, shredded pork meat, a poached egg, sheets of dried seaweed, a couple of slices of hot pink and white rolled fishcake with chopped scallions. The broth is unsurprisingly and unmistakably porky and is pleasant and mild, without the depth of flavor of the Setagaya broth. The noodles, which are handmade, do not taste of much more than flour. They seem an afterthought in the bowl, a neutral backdrop for the pork which is certainly the focus of this dish. The shredded pork shoulder is tender and savory, while the pork belly is delicious but a bit stringy in the meat portion running between layers of fat. The pork belly meat has a texture that is much more successful in the pork buns: thick slices of succulent, rich fat and meat folded into a steamed white bun (like Chinese *Dong Po* pork) with a couple of crisp pickled cucumber slices (\$9). The pickle plate (\$11) features a colorful array of those house-brined pickles, made from market vegetables and fruits, and refreshingly crisp and acidic—a necessary counterpart to all this fatty pork. Aside from these offerings, Momofuku has a wide and tempting range of dishes which would be perfect for sharing among a group of friends.

Setting: East village hipster pork temple. Again, bar is an apt descriptor—noisy, raucous, and cramped. Eaters are crammed together, elbow to elbow and back to back at communal low light wood tables, or at a long bar. Getting in and out of one’s seat can be practically athletic. Space at the door is inadequate, and waiting for a table can feel like being on the subway.

The verdict: Setagaya wins the ramen challenge hands-down, though the sea-flavor of the broth may not be to everyone’s liking. For those who are more interested in meat than noodles, or for a social occasion, Momofuku is a better choice. The ramen wars will heat up again in April when a branch of the much-hyped Japanese Hakata Ippudo, featured in a Japanese ramen museum and ramen Hall of Fame, opens in the East Village. ☺

## Ramen Setagaya

141 First Avenue, between St. Mark’s Place and 9th Street (212-529-2740). Cash only.

## Momofuku Noodle Bar

171 First Avenue, between 10th and 11th Streets (212-777-7773)

Hakata Ippudo NY (projected opening March 31)

65 Fourth Avenue, between 9th and 10th Streets (212-388-0088)

# Muffin Man

ENGİN ÖZERTUGRUL

“Wait, wait, wait!” I yelled, “What did you say?”

“I said blueberry muffin.” Her voice was hasty and showed irritation. Blueberry muffin! I wondered how a word that sounds so beautiful and slides so effortlessly could crash on my ears like a bug on a windshield, giving me no chance to compute its meaning. I can still remember her carefree tone, unmistakably an implication of simplicity—a blueberry muffin—words that the whole world should know!

But I didn't. I had no idea what it was. Thinking back, this could have been the first time the word was used in my presence. It was my third week in the USA and my first day at work in the laundromat. My job was washing and drying. This was the easy part. The hard part was the money. I was slow at the register. When the change was not exact, pennies, dimes, and quarters were my nightmares. Oftentimes, I felt embarrassed to count money like a six year old and I left many annoyed and frustrated customers behind. This did not escape the owner's attention. I was asked either to leave or to accept \$ 4.75/hour (minimum wage was \$5.25 back then).

The name of the woman mentioned above was Gladys, my co-worker at the laundromat. The story is one of the most ordinary to occur in almost every work place in the country: I was going to get something to eat and she asked me if I could bring her a blueberry muffin. I still remember her puzzled face when I asked her to write the b-l-u-e-b-e-r-r-y m-u-f-f-i-n on a piece of paper. After that day, I was her Muffin Man, a joke that continued to entertain us during unbearably boring hours of washing and folding.

It was late afternoon in December 1993. I was looking 15,000 feet down over the tops of the Alps, which just started to glow from the setting sun. In approximately seven hours, my plane was to land in New York City, a city that I only knew through books, media, and movies. Perhaps inspired by that breathtaking scene, for a brief moment, all the great expectations and dreams about the new world seemed so attainable. I was in a state of unbearable excitement and overwhelming optimism.

Three weeks later, I was broke, and I had nowhere to go. This was the time when all my dreams about advancing my education and bettering my life were dashed by my sponsor's “things changed” speech. The



Doruk Golcu

price of her guilt was her offer to pay my return trip to Istanbul. But I was not ready to go back. I was stubborn and full of pride, not a very good combination with what I had, a \$100 bill in my pocket. Deep inside, I knew that it was a foolish risk to take, but I took it and became a \$4.75/hour laundryman for the next nine months.

My experience had nothing to do with culture shock; I was not the “fish out of water,” either. This was not a sudden death, but rather a gradual unconscious disintegration of self. It was unconscious because I simply was not aware of what was happening to me, and it was disintegration because it felt like the universe I knew was knocked from under me.

I can almost hear some of you out there thinking that I must not know a single word in English in order to experience alienation at such magnitude. This isn't true. In fact, I had a good English education back home. However, I was naïve enough to equate the ability of reading and writing in English with “living in English.”

I would like to think that countless silly things I did were due to this shortcoming and not plain stupidity. One of those occurred on that special day, the day we all wish to remember with pleasant memories, my wedding day. Everything was going beautifully until our vows, where I interrupted the judge when he was reciting “my wedded wife,” and instead of repeating the words (which I was

expected to do) I blurted a big fat “What?” This was an unconscious blunder of a conditioned mind. In Turkish, “evli” is the corresponding adjective for “married” or “wedded.” In this usage, I thought, “wedded” was a status quo, and it did not have a present connotation. I thought I was being asked to marry a woman who was already married! You can't repeat that vow! Not if you are still “living in Turkish.”

Why did I stay? If it was so hard, why didn't I go back? I wish I could say that I was working towards some divine plan or that I always do what I promise. No, none of that. I stayed because somebody told me I can't. There I've said it. This was my dirty little secret. It was pure pride driven by anger. It was not a clear-cut plan with specific direction. It was my anger towards my unfulfilled dreams that kept me alive at the time. It was also my pride: the humiliation of going back was greater than staying and doing all the jobs that I hated to do.

Fourteen years later, I no longer recognize the muffin man. That person is diminished, and no longer exists. Yet a muffin man lives in many people around us. These are the people we see at every corner: bagel stores, laundromats, dry cleaners, gas stations, landscaping companies, and moving agencies. Quite often, I walk into these places, where I am greeted by many, and almost always, I leave with a large reluctant smile across my face. ☺

## Rockefeller Film Series: Scientists on the Silver Screen

ALEXIS GAMBIS

On Friday, April 4 at 8 p.m., we are delighted to host a premiere screening of the film *Dark Matter*. Inspired by real events, *Dark Matter* delves into the world of a brilliant Chinese astronomy student Liu Xing whose dreams are challenged when he arrives in the US to pursue his Ph.D. Initially, Liu seems to live a charmed life in America: he works for the research team of the famous cosmologist Jacob Reiser (Aidan Quinn) and earns recognition for his ability to grasp difficult scholarship, while also finding favor of a wealthy university patron and Chinese culture enthusiast Joanna Silver (Meryl Streep). He relishes the freedoms of his American life: unadulterated television, flirting with the woman at the coffee shop, and being considered a peer of his academic advisor.

Directed by renowned opera director Chen Shi-Zheng (*The Peony Pavilion*, Lincoln Center Festival) and written by Billy Shebar, *Dark Matter* was the recipient of this year's Alfred P. Sloan Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. This prize, made possible by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to the Sundance Institute's Science-in-Film Initiative, carries a \$20,000 cash award to the writer/director of an outstanding feature

film focusing on science or technology as a theme, or depicting a scientist, engineer, or mathematician as a major character.

The film is one of the few, which recognizes and accurately depicts the evocative portrayal of the scientific passion, career politics, and cultural conflicts in an astrophysics research laboratory. After the screening, screenwriter Billy Shebar will be there to answer questions about the film and more broadly about the crossroads of science and film. The film is also part of the Imagine Science Film Festival showcase events. More information can be found at <http://www.imagine-sciencefilms.com>.

We continue later, on April 17 at 2 p.m. in Weiss 301, with a not-to-miss *Science and Media Lecture* by Darcy Kelly. Professor of Biological Sciences at Columbia University, Prof. Kelly's talk is entitled: *Greek or goddess: scientists on the silver screen?* As a scientist studying the neurobiology of vocal communication, she will speak about her other interest in science communication: her close involvement with science film, TV, books, and movies. For audio podcasts of previous *Science and Media* lectures and for more information on upcoming lectures, visit <http://www.imaginaldisc.com/lectures>. ◉

## In Our Good Books

The reading suggestions have been kindly provided by staff members of the downtown bookstore McNally Robinson.

*The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, by George Saunders

With *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, George Saunders gives us a hilarious, harrowing, and utterly charming fable. Within this small package are biomechanical creatures you will adore in a brain-teaser of a setting, facing the major personal and civic trials of our times. Saunders winks at us throughout, boiling the terrifying complexities of character and politics and ethics down to a cartoonish essence and, when through winking, delivers an ending so spectacularly satisfying in its flair and sweetly nihilistic in its promise you may come to tears.

*The Fatal Shore*, by Robert Hughes

Most recently the author of *Things I Didn't Know*, a 2006 memoir about growing up in Australia, Robert Hughes is perhaps best known for his history on the founding of his native land. It is, without a doubt, "an epic" as the subtitle states. The founding of a colony of England's cast-offs and convicts makes for fascinating reading, and Hughes tells it brilliantly. ◉

## Life on a Roll

*Modern Times*



Images by Daniel Andor



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