

A Midtown Summit

East met West at Malta last month, but this month the Cold War will melt some more, when East meets West at the Midtown Cafe. Oscar winning filmmaker Pamela Conn will team up with Soviet songsters Thomas and Tarmo Urb for an evening of music at the Birmingham restaurant. For more on the "summit," see Street Beats, Page 3D.

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Hero the Greek knew a good thing when he saw it.

In his writings, "Pneumatika," the barber-mathematician described a machine that automatically dispensed holy water to Egyptian temple-goers for the price of five drachmas per drop.

"There was a counter-weight. You'd put in a drachma and it would dispense a drop of water," noted David Stone, public relations director for the National Automatic Merchandising Association in Chicago. "That was the earliest known vending machine, developed around 500 B.C. in Alexandria."

The ancient concept was reborn in coin-operated water fountains and Tutti-Frutti gum machines in the late 1800s and evolved into technologically sophisticated mechanisms, including multi-item vendors, hot beverage makers, automated restaurants and credit card operated machines during this century.

Vending machines today dispense everything from videotapes and condoms in the United States to beer in Japan and blue jeans in France.

It takes more than a few drachmas to buy water from a vending machine, but it's still available in a healthy rather than holy version.

Spring water, brand name juices, oat bran snacks, yogurt and other health-related snacks popping up in vending slots that used to hold candy bars, potato chips, pop and coffee.

"There is a trend toward more healthy items because we're more conscious about what we put in our bodies," Stone said. "One thing that's showing up a lot in health clubs are juices. Over the last couple of years we've seen machines like Coke and Pepsi, but with brand name juices."

LOU HIRSH, president of Vend-O-Matic in Troy, said he'd rather nibble a Hostess-brand "Snowball" confection or guzzle Gatorade than dine on oat bran bars and fruit juice. But because many of his customers prefer low-calorie treats, Hirsh supplies everything from fresh salads to watermelon wedges in machines set in factories and office building lunchrooms.

Seasons also dictate the fare. Some Vend-O-Matic machines carry hot apple cider in the fall and iced tea in summer. Salads are a hit in warm months and with women and younger employees.

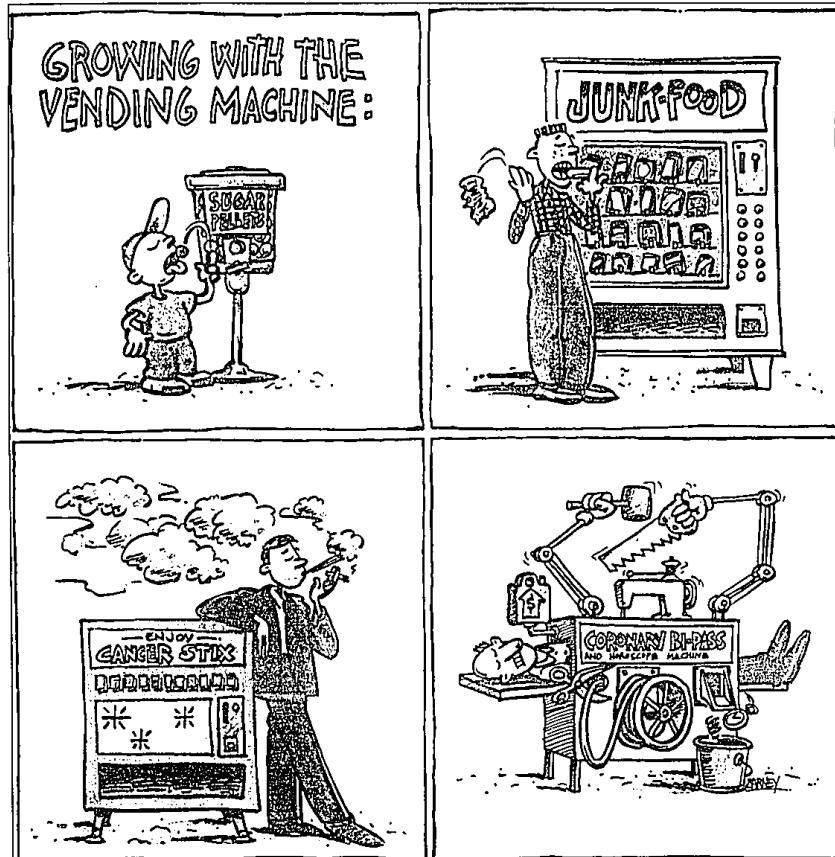
"Our clientele varies greatly; we try to give them what they want," he said. "Coffee drinkers are a very small group. Our coffee clientele is usually age 40 and up."

Big breakfast items sell easily to industrial plant employees and Snickers bars outsell all other snacks, regardless of dietary attitudes.

But Lois Thieleke, home economist for the Oakland County Cooperative Extension said vendors "can hardly keep machines stocked" with yogurt, microwave popcorn, fruit juice and apples in her Pontiac office.

Thieleke said extension service staff overwhelmingly decided to replace a traditional pastry and

'Metal munching' mania: The vending of America



snack vending machine with healthier items.

But she also pointed out that vending machines with lunch and dinner entrees are "no worse than eating at a fast food restaurant" and in some cases, may be better because the food is "portion controlled." There's no going back for seconds.

"EATING OUT of a vending machine is a heck of a lot better than some of the choices we can

make, if we were eating in a restaurant," she said.

But consumers balked at that notion last year. "In the early 1980s, vending operators were putting out a good food product, but it looked like the kind of thing you could buy on an Amtrak train. There were some problems with display," said Tim Sanford, executive editor of Vending Times Magazine in New York. "People were willing to pay 75

cents more for identical items from mobile catering trucks or restaurants.

"People liked to squeeze the sandwiches and talk to drivers about last night's game. They just didn't perceive the value of the vending item."

"Now that's a thing of the past. The automated teller machine has accustomed people to impersonal transactions. The vending machine is more widely accepted. Vending

is moving into the mainstream. They're better able to provide attractive products."

Sanford predicts that vending machine operators eventually will stop producing mundane lunch fare — like ham and cheese sandwiches — and will begin to stock machines with specialty or "signature" items, surrounded by brand name foods and single serving products like burritos and pierogies. "You can put virtually anything

in them under \$12.50; the machines go up to \$12.50 today," he said. "You could sell digital watches, if you wanted. At a recent convention, the president of the automatic merchandising association said 'we could sell Yugos, if we could solve the pricing problem.'"

"THE VENDING industry follows the business industry," Sanford said, noting that most consumers use vending machines in the work place. "When employment is up the vending industry blossoms. When everything goes south, like it did in the '70s and early '80s, business digs a hole and pulls you in after them."

"Twenty-five years ago the vending industry had pioneers and innovators. That stopped during the '70s. Now, it's like the '60s all over again."

French fry machines haven't worked well in the past because they are labor intensive, requiring a close monitor on the frying oil and more frequent servicing. Greida is testing a new machine that fries and dispenses 160 portions. Golden Valley is marketing a microwave french fry that browns and crisps on heating elements inside the vending machine.

Another firm is working on a pizza vending machine that microwaves a seven-inch pie before it comes out of the machine.

"The problem is that it requires a slow delivery system — 55 seconds," Sanford said. "You can't get service like that in a McDonalds, but the trend in vending machines is faster."

Coffee machines are incorporating hoppers and grinders that pulverize the beans and brew a cup of coffee on the spot. Packaging that doubles as a bowl has supplanted canned foods.

Hirsh dresses up sandwiches in catchy titles — "Rumble Seat" and "Cruising Grattoli" — to make them more appealing to consumers. Some machines award free products and some are set on a timer to work at specific times of the day.

"WE MIGHT GIVE away a T-shirt or some other promotional item. It's a gimmick, but it creates excitement for the consumer," he said.

Most machines are equipped with built-in money changers and some accept debit cards in lieu of coins.

Stone and Sanford said the cards work best in a setting that guarantees a specific pool of customers. The consumer inserts cards and coins into a machine which tallies the amount of credit on a magnetic strip on the card. Some systems keep accounts in the machine rather than on the card itself.

"The biggest change in the industry has been the design of the machine," Stone added. "It has been made to show more and more of the product."

The equipment also has been downsized to suit locations with fewer users. Some incorporate a snack dispenser, pop and coffee machine all in one vending machine.

"The general trend is toward more food items and smaller locations," Stone said.

R.U. Syrius Karlos Barney



"Behold, there came three Magi from the East, bearing gifts of Gold, Frankanstein, and Myrrh."

Rail service gets better in Europe

By Iris Sanderson Jones
contributing travel editor

If you ever played with toy trains, watching the rail cars race over hills and across bridges, you can imagine how it must feel to build a railway network that connects a continent.

Amtrak and ViaRail may cut service in the United States and Canada, but European train service is expanding rapidly, with trains that are getting faster, more comfortable and more convenient every year. Europe still lives and travels by train, and the traveler benefits.

If you can travel without too much luggage, this is an ideal year to see Europe by train. At the least, take a fast train from airport to city or from one city to another. At the most, use the Eurailpass or the BritRail pass to meander at will around Europe.

On a recent trip to Europe, for example, I rode the fast train from Frankfurt to Cologne, sailed by Rhine cruiser to Wiesbaden, by car to Heidelberg and Stuttgart, took several trains between Stuttgart,

Montpellier and Bordeaux and a final train from Bordeaux to Paris.

My Eurailpass allowed me unlimited travel on first- and second-class trains in 17 countries. I traveled

to Paris in a spacious, well-lit first-class coach with new blue carpeting and wide seats, reminiscent of first-class airline seats, two seats on either side of the aisle. The front half of the car was



A curved glass roof allows the warm sunshine to pour in on the platform of the train station in Nice, France.

smoking, the back half non-smoking.

Another style of first-class cars has small six- or eight-seat compartments, with passengers facing one another. You've seen them in those Agatha Christie movies.

SECOND-CLASS cars also come either compartment-style or four abreast. Sometimes a single car is half second and half first class. Whether you need the extra luxury depends on your travel style and the time of year. Most people travel second class, so you may have more room and less hassle in first if you travel in high season.

If you buy your ticket as you go, instead of using Eurailpass, first-class costs 50 percent more than second. A Eurailpass, which is first class, must be bought before you leave home, costs \$340 for 15 days. Prices are higher for longer periods. A Saverpass, for two people October through March, and for three people April through September, costs \$210 per person. A second-class Youthpass for those under 26 years is \$380 for a month.

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