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Profs Debate Merits of Tasty Pancakes, Yummy Pastries; No One Wins

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STAFF REPORTER

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Mob psychology, a conversation with an intelligent computer, and audience participation all numbered among the tactics used by six MIT professors Wednesday evening at MIT Hillel's Sixth Annual Latke vs. Hamentashen Debate.

Termed the "intellectual highlight of the MIT year" by moderator Jeremy Wolfe PhD '81, Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences senior lecturer, the heated debate pits two Jewish delicacies against one another: the latke, a fried potato pancake often served during Hanukkah, and the hamentash, a three-sided, fruit-filled cookie traditionally eaten during Purim.

Defending the latke were Peter A. Dourmashkin '76, Department of Physics senior lecturer, Stephen W. Van Evera, Professor of Political Science, and Patrick H. Winston, Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. For the hamantash were Erik D. Demaine, Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Ari W. Epstein PhD '95, Terrascope lecturer, and Hazel Sive, Professor of Biology.

The hamentash team won the coin toss (actually a ramen-noodle-package toss) and charitably opted to let the latke team speak first.

Classical latke mechanics

Dourmashkin opened by demonstrating the sinking and floating properties of the potato and latke, which he kept in his shirt pocket. The differences between potato and latke properties were further exemplified by Galileo's breakthrough, where the scientist realized that both fall to the ground at the same rate.

Dourmashkin said that the phrase "Your Latke," often mistakenly pronounced as "Eureka," is attributed falsely to Archimedes. Dourmashkin concluded by explaining the association of pi with latkes — and he added that the hamentash can only be associated with the square root of three, "an ugly number."

A project-based paradigm for pedagogy from pastries

Epstein spoke first for the hamentash side with a presentation on "The hamentash: an ideal model of project-based learning."



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A latke mascot (Matthew S. Cons '08) and a hamentashen mascot (Lindsey A. Pete '08) duke it out before Wednesday's annual Latke-Hamentashen Debate held in 26-100.

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The traditional learning model, or “firehose” method of learning, ultimately hurts the students’ educational experience, Epstein said, illustrating his point by showing pictures of unfortunate students with latkes. Epstein proposed a “constructivist” method of learning that bases the experience on students’ own interests.

Hamentashen offer students endless dough and filling possibilities, from apricot to tuna, Epstein said — while latkes only let students choose between potato and sweet potato.

He had the audience participate to try to prove his point: half the audience, the hamentash side, could decorate their paper-plate “hamentashen” with stickers and decide on a unique fold. The latke side was left with plain paper plates.

Politics, psychology, and pancakes

Back on the latke side, Van Evera called on audience members to “let the inner Karl Rove out” in his presentation on “Latkes rule, hamentashen drool: the case for latkes as American political campaign consultants would make it.”

Using the time-honored “prove-it-isn’t-so” rhetorical strategy, Van Evera connected the hamentash to “all things bad,” such as Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and he encouraged the audience to start referring to the cookie as the freedomtash. Van Evera then roused the audience into a mob-like chant of, “USA! USA! Latkes, latkes USA!”

Van Evera concluded that latke cooking oil is a matter of national security because it can be used to fry al-Qaeda invaders.

An undesirable mutation

Sive argued the hamentash side from a systems biology approach. Citing Scientist H. A. Men, a researcher based on the Stata Center, Sive argued that to determine what genetic networks build the h. tashen (the hamentash’s true scientific name), a mutant screening approach must be taken. The results of a mutant screen were fascinating, she said, as three main phenotypes were observed — too much filling, too many tails, and arrested development, which UROP students named, “latke.”

Sive continued by applying the mutant screen results to broader genetic networks, which brought scientists to conclude that wild-type h. tashen is a complex, important life form compared with the rudimentary latke, whose genetic network consists of only a straight line.

The intelligent machine prefers latkes

Winston presented the audience with a computer program that has supposedly passed the Turing Test, which tests whether a machine is intelligent by measuring its capability to converse with a human. The following conversation ensued:

Winston: Do you like latke?

Computer: I eat them often, how about you?

W: They say the chancellor eats hamentashen frequently.

C: He must be very reckless.

W: They say they eat hamentashen at TEAL.

C: TEAL must be a place where fun goes to die.

W: Which team will be ready to go on day one?

C: The hamentashen team has no experience.

W: What would you want to eat if the red phone rings at 3am?

C: Latke without any doubt.

Circles or triangles?

Demaine, who like Winston is a computer scientist, took a stance based on folding. Latkes naturally want to fold up into triangles, Demaine said, but hamentashen are happy the way they are, since triangles cannot be folded into circles.

Obviously, he said, a bigger question of triangle versus circles emerges — one cannot fold a triangle to a circle, and perfect circles don't exist (even on the internet). Since no perfect circles exist, there can be no perfect latke, Demaine argued. Demaine said he spent a lot of time looking at pictures of latkes on the Internet, but even “the most beautiful latke that he could find” was unsatisfactory.

Demaine further argued that because circles cannot tile a plane, frying latkes is a waste of space and energy. Wasting energy, he says, contributes to global warming.

After each team presented 5 minute rebuttals, Wolfe ran an “election,” where audience members chose among the latke, the hamentash, and Ralph Nader. The debate ended in a tie, so Wolfe determined that it would need to happen again next year.

Sponsored by MIT Hillel, this year's debate was organized by Matthew Cons '08, Benjamin Epstein '10, and Mish Madsen '09.

“The debate demonstrates what MIT Hillel strives to do: bring together a community,” said Cons.

“We run the debate purely for the entertainment,” added Epstein. “After all, there's really nothing funnier than listening to your physics professor passionately try to convince you that Gauss' Law is actually a latke-lovers' conspiracy.”

Asked whether he really does prefer the latke, Dourmashkin replied, “I never have hamentashen.”