



Cafeterias.. A place for cheap food, socializing and a lot of fun..

By: Ali Saeed

“Here the atmosphere is totally different from the restaurant formality,” said Saddam, a journalist in his thirties who was sitting in Lolowa cafeteria at the Misbahi on al-Siteen meters road while enjoying his snack with lemon juice.

A cafeteria is an informal food place where people have snacks and drinks such as tea, coffee and fresh juices at low prices. It is usually open very early in the morning at six am until eleven before midnight. Most cafeterias are exclusively for men by tradition, however, a few have created isolated covered space for families and women.

Although there are restaurants everywhere you go in Sana’a, but for the breakfast, employees prefer to have it in cafeterias. You can sit there for hours sipping on a fresh orange juice between YR 100 to 250 according to concentration of the fresh oranges in the juice.

You can eat egg and cheese sandwiches, or beans peas. Some high level cafertias mostly

on Hadda Road provide more expensive dishes such as chopped meat, liver. And even fewer food places make what is known in Sana’a as Mutabak or shataer which is traditional bread like the Indian paratha cooked with eggs, green leaves and tomatos. They also offer a local delicacy called Masoob Malaki, “Royal mix”: bread with cream, honey, almonds, peanuts and cheddar cheese. It is eaten with a spoon, a plate serves one person and is around YR 300 (USD 1.5).

Magnona “Crazy meal”: made of jam, cottage cheese, boiled eggs, olives. It is a delicacy among the cafeteria crowd. In the cafeteria it is served in a plate and people eat it with bread, sometimes they could take it in a sandwich. A crazy meal is enough for two



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people and only costs YR 250 (USD 1.25). At any point of time you should find at least two people in a 25 square meters cafeteria on average. Some larger ones have an extension on the sidewalk where they set up tables usually under a large umbrella. Peak times are in the morning between seven to nine as government and private sector employees take their breakfast before heading off to work. And between seven and nine in the evening for a cheap dinner in a friendly atmosphere.

People who frequently eat in cafeterias find it easy to enjoy the fun atmosphere and joke with each other. Boredom has no place here as friends gather in groups to eat while joking. It was eight in the evening, even on a workday you can hear the laughter echoing so loud from young friends whose dinner lasts longer than usual because they have nothing better to do and are enjoying the atmosphere. Two friends were sharing an Araise shake which is made of mango,

apples, honey and artificial juice, while teasing each other. Any passer-by can notice smiles on the faces of customers and rarely sees a person frowning. Grouchy people in cafeterias usually sit alone and leave within a few minutes. Yet for many, even if they came alone they end up joining others and making new friends. And even those who started off in a bad mood usually leave with a smile on their faces. Most of the cafeteria crowd are high

school and university students, employees, and daily laborers. In the cafeterias, you see uniforms, men elegantly dressed and even those in shabby worn clothes. Few beggars even buy their meals from the cafeteria but they usually take their order out. "In cafeterias, there are services and things that can not be found in average restaurants," said Jameel Al-Asimi an engineer from Sana'a. He was referring to the music which is mostly religious songs, traditional Yemeni songs, popular music and in some cafeterias you find Egyptian and Gulf songs. In cafeterias the order comes very quickly, and the waiter always stands on the tables taking orders and making sure everything is ok. The tables turnover is very quick compared to restaurants where people take a long time to have their meals. "In cafeteria, the waiters, the cook, and even the owner of the cafeteria care a lot of their customers more than restaurants do," said Al-Asimi remembering how waiters in cafeteria engage in conversations with the customers especially the regular ones. Because the cafeteria spaces are usually small, the interaction is higher among customers and the service providers. A waiter greets customers the minute they enter the door which is widely open, he remembers the orders and shouts them right from where he stands. He has to shout in a funny tone which is common among waiters so that he is heard. If there are many customers, you hear the different waiters shouting orders all over the place. For those who come from the countryside to Sana'a city for work, cafeterias become their second home in terms of socializing and feeling the comfort of others in the big city. Many stay between Magrib and Esha prayers in order to engage with the world around them instead of being on their own. "We come to Sana'a for work and we can't afford to buy our daily food from restaurants, so we always have our food and our tea from cafeterias," said Faysal Al-Shami, a plumber from Ibb. Opening a cafeteria in Sana'a is a good business, which provides more than just food for the customers.

