Science Cafe

It was an intimate setting with sofas, coffee tables and potted palm trees. Piano music tinkled, and the pop of a cork pulled from a wine bottle at the bar could be heard above the quiet chatter. A waitress moved among the gathering crowd with trays of food and beer as Merriam Professor of Biology David Roos stepped up to a tall table draped with white linen.

It was the first Penn Science Cafe, a series of monthly plain-language conversations on research and science held last spring at the MarBar restaurant at 40th and Walnut streets. The cafe is scheduled to run through the summer with sessions of snacks, spirits and science on tsunamis, evolutionary psychology, relativity, dinosaurs, cryptography and more. Roos sought to get behind the hype and told the friendly crowd “what genomics is really about.”

He explained that the diagnosis of disease using genomics is “here right now ... but the dream of gene therapy is certainly far off.” Questions, including a few from the bartender, allowed listeners to steer the talk in directions that interested them.

“I’ve long felt that it’s really quite a shame that scientists do what they do off in some closet,” Roos told the science enthusiasts, “and that there’s no discussion with the broader public.” The Penn Science Cafe promises to get them out of that closet.

Easy Listening

Through a new audio archive, the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing is making it easy for poetry lovers to study their art in an unconventional way – by listening rather than reading. The center’s Web site now offers digital recordings of more than 1,500 poems ready to be downloaded for free.

This unique archive, called PennSound, was developed by Al Filreis, center director and Kelly Family Professor, and Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor of English, so scholars and poetry fans can hear poems read by their favorite authors anytime from anywhere. Filreis and Bernstein hope PennSound, the world’s largest archive of Web-based poetry sound files, will preserve and distribute these readings while highlighting the importance of the spoken word to the study of poetry.

Most of the recordings, which include some rare readings, were made by visitors to Penn’s Kelly Writers House over the last 10 years. But other poets, upon learning of the archive, which received more than 3,000 hits on its first day, have asked that their work also be included. While other online poetry archives include large, often unwieldy recordings of multiple works, PennSound features song-length files of individual poems, thus allowing easy access to specific works. A searchable catalog, expected early next year, will make the archive’s contents even more accessible to a worldwide audience.

Listen to PennSound at http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/.

Dinner and Democracy

Sixteen graduate students showed they were hungry for more than a good meal at the Graduate Student Center’s Theory and Practice Dinner on March 23. Gathered around a conference table on the center’s third floor, they discussed the nature of American democracy while enjoying an elegant dinner with Penn president Amy Gutmann and political science chair Rogers Smith.

The series offers advanced students the chance to have in-depth conversations with practicing academics in an intimate setting. Gutmann and Smith were invited for their comprehensive background in the study of democracy. Smith, the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science, investigates the ways in which people have been excluded from the benefits of citizenship while Gutmann examines how people are prepared to take part in a democracy. “We cannot become an eminent university without becoming more diverse,” she said. “If citizens are passive, if they are not leaders, then they are not citizens in the highest sense.”

Over two hours, the conversation ranged from the benefits of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” to the greatest obstacles to a fuller, more engaged citizenry. “In a large-scale democratic society, it’s hard to imagine how people can feel like they’re having an impact,” Smith noted. “In this country, we would need some big changes in the structural system to increase participation in our democracy.” Those changes, according to the group, might include more political parties and making Election Day a holiday.
Novel Thoughts

After talk-show host Oprah Winfrey revamped her popular online book club to focus on literature, she looked to SAS for expertise. Two members of the English faculty have since served as literary consultants to the club, which features televised discussions and online message boards, Q&A’s and supplemental readings.

Peter Conn, the Andrea Mitchell Term Professor in English, recently guided club members in reading Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*. Conn, who wrote *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*, prepared background materials for the club’s Web site and answered readers’ questions via e-mail. He was asked about a range of topics, including Buck’s writing style, her influence on other writers and the symbolism contained in the book.

“It’s an opportunity to take one’s scholarly materials and share them with a broader audience,” Conn says. “I think Oprah has done more to promote reading in this country over the last few years than literally anybody else.”

Associate professor of English and director of women’s studies Rita Barnard was the first academic the club’s producers asked to answer readers’ questions online. In 2003, she led readers through Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*. As a native of South Africa, where the novel is set, and a scholar of South African literature, she was able to help readers understand both the literary and cultural aspects of the novel.

Conn’s and Barnard’s comments on the books are available at http://www.oprah.com/obc_classic/obc_main.jhtml.

Found in Translation

The scent of peeled oranges filled the room where translator Edith Grossman, CW’57, G’59, had come to share boxed lunches and conversation with a group of mostly Spanish majors.

The class was working its way through Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Grossman, America’s foremost translator of Latin American literature, had recently published a widely praised translation of the 400-year-old classic and was on campus to receive the 2005 SAS Distinguished Alumni Award. The translation took five years of work in her Manhattan apartment – eight hours a day; seven days a week. “I thought I’d spend the rest of my life trapped there,” she told the class.

Students asked about the biggest challenges she faced, her favorite parts of the novel, and how much she consults with Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez when she translates his works. “One of the things great art does is tell us about ourselves,” she said, responding to a query about the popularity of her *Quixote*. “I think people are hungry for that but are being fed on empty calories.”

Besides stories and opinions, Grossman shared the cookie from her boxed lunch. Some class members complained that Cervantes’ book is long and difficult. It’ll get richer the next time you read it, she assured them. “For now, get a kick out of it. Forget that it’s a classic.”

In April, Brian Greene delivered the 2005 Dean’s Forum lecture, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time and the Texture of Reality*. The renowned physicist and bestselling author wowed the standing-room-only crowd by demonstrating how string theory can explain the mysteries of space and time. Earlier that day, Greene thrilled an undergraduate physics class by sharing lunch and providing insight about his life as one of the world’s foremost superstring theorists.