



In addition to the large refectories, the smaller cafeterias often lead a „shadowy existence“. But these facilities also make a significant contribution to the inexpensive catering for students. In 2022, almost 365.000 hot drinks were sold there and almost as many snacks were produced. In our interview, Michael Rolka from the cafeteria administration tells us what makes the offer here so special, even apart from coffee.

Mang: Hi and welcome to a new edition of our my–stuwe podcast. Today we take another look at the gastronomic offerings of the Studierendenwerk. In addition to the large refectories, the smaller cafeterias often lead a „shadowy existence“. But these facilities also make a significant contribution to your inexpensive meals. The Studierendenwerk runs five cafeterias in Tübingen alone. In addition, there are 8 other facilities throughout the university region. In 2021, more than 150,000 hot drinks were sold there and almost as many sandwiches were produced. Those are pretty amazing numbers when you consider that many cafeterias couldn't open at all due to Corona. Someone who knows a lot about these places is Michael Rolka, the cafeterias' marketing assistant. In today's interview, he tells us what makes the offer here so special.

Hello Mr Rolka, thank you for agreeing to introduce us to your area of responsibility at the Studierendenwerk today. When you think of studying and eating, the first thing that probably comes to mind is the refectory. But in fact, the Studierendenwerk also offers other gastronomic services. What would you say? What distinguishes the cafeteria from its – let's call it the big sister – the refectory? And why do you think the cafeteria is perhaps so important for studying?

Rolka: Hello Mr Mang, I am glad to be here today. To answer your question: The clearest distinction is actually the opening hours on the one hand and the offer on the other. While the Mensa serves lunch every day (then it closes again), the cafeterias are open all day and are then responsible for snacks.

Mang: As I said at the beginning, the Studierendenwerk runs a total of 13 cafeterias. From Sigmaringen to Trossingen to Hohenheim and Nürtingen. That's also a huge

geographical span. What is the difference between all these facilities?

Rolka: The cafeterias differ in size, for one thing. Let's take the cafeteria in the Theologicum here in Tübingen or the Menseria in Trossingen as an example. It's something in between a refectory and a cafeteria. Both facilities are among the smallest we operate, both in terms of space and staff numbers. In contrast, there are facilities such as the cafeteria on the Morgenstelle here in Tübingen, which is by far the largest cafeteria in terms of space. And it is also far ahead in terms of the number of employees. Of course, this difference alone also requires a different range of services. But we make sure that a certain basic range is offered in all our houses. Depending on the local and staffing situation, the range can be expanded accordingly. The Morgenstelle cafeteria is a good example of this. It is currently the only cafeteria that also offers a changing lunch.

Mang: You've already touched a little on the subject of assortment. Coffee, sandwiches, cold sodas – that's probably what every student would understand by a classic range of products in a cafeteria. Is that now also standard at the Studierendenwerk and are there perhaps products in your range that particularly stand out?

Rolka: Basically, that's exactly what it is. The task of the cafeteria is, as I said, to provide snacks, and these are quite classically the products I just mentioned. But that doesn't mean that these products have to be boring. So we are always looking for interesting products and exciting recipe ideas, for example for our snack area. The fact that this is well received by the students is shown by the sales figures of, for example, the „Genial Veganer“ or the „Treue Seele“ or also the wraps we offer. We also make sure that this offer is constantly on

the move. This means that new products are regularly added to the range, and in return we take other products off sale again. So students should always be able to discover something new in our cafeterias.

Mang: Now nutrition is always a topic that is subject to certain trends. That means that in the last few years there have always been topics like organic, vegan, low carb or regionality, to name just a few. To what extent do you try to take such trends into account when putting together your range?

Rolka: Of course, this is also an issue for us. We try to work with regional and local partners. I would just like to name two or three. For example, the Keim bakery, which I'm sure many of our listeners know, or the beverage producer Teinacher. We also have a local producer, the Rosecker company, which makes a great apple spritzer, based here in Tübingen. Our coffee is Fairtrade. We also have organic products in our range of dairy products and non-alcoholic beverages, for example ChariTea, which I'm sure some of you know. But we also have organic and many fair-trade-certified products in our chocolate bar range, for example from GEPA. The topic of vegan products is also a big issue for us. We are trying to do a lot more. But the problem is that it is relatively difficult to find products on the market that meet our quality standards, that have a reasonable price and that are also available in reasonable quantities.

That means we are constantly on the lookout for new products. But it always takes time to find something that we can offer in the cafeteria with a clear conscience. But we are in the process of expanding this range because we know that it is very popular with the students. I have already mentioned the "Genial Veganer". This is one of our best-selling products in the snack segment. Conversely, this means that it is not only bought by vegans.

Mang: The fact is that since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, there has been repeated criticism of the student union because opening hours have been reduced and some facilities have even been closed completely. During this time, we have also received many letters from students and university employees. Why is it so difficult to expand the services again at the moment?

Rolka: On the one hand, we are also suffering from the shortage of skilled workers, like the entire German economy. On the other hand, we have to struggle with

massive price increases in all areas. And we have lost many suppliers, at least in parts. This means that the supply chains have been affected, and they are still not back to the way they were before Corona.

Mang: A completely different topic, which is very much a local issue and which has also been of great concern to us here in Tübingen in particular. In January 2022, the university town introduced a packaging tax to counteract the consumption of disposable packaging more strongly. This decision also had far-reaching consequences for the cafeterias of the Studierendenwerk. What were they exactly?

Rolka: Sustainability has also been an issue for us for a long time. Since 2016, for example, we have offered the KeepCup and other thermal cups to get students away from the so-called paper cups when they draw a coffee. The packaging tax has had an impact on the StuWe in that we have completely abandoned paper cups in this area. So we only serve porcelain in the cafeterias or you bring your own cups. Of course, we also took a very close look at the packaging tax, but found that we were not affected as much as other restaurateurs here in Tübingen, for example.

A little anecdote, perhaps by the way: At the Morgenstelle we sell frozen yoghurt and that is completely waste-free. Both the sundae and the ice cream spoon are edible. The spoon would almost have fallen under the packaging tax if the manufacturer hadn't intervened massively and convinced the city of Tübingen that no tax should be applied here.

Mang: Yes, that is really a curious story. Let's stay with this topic for a moment. The switch to porcelain tableware has led to another problem. If I know correctly, the Studierendenwerk does not charge a deposit on plates, cups or cutlery. Unfortunately, many guests do not return the dishes to the respective institution after use. Why is this so problematic and how do you try to counteract this development?

Rolka: Well, if the guests don't bring the dishes back, then we simply don't have them. And then we have a problem. If we can't put any more cups at the coffee machines, we can't sell any coffee. And not everyone has their own cup to compensate for that. It is also not very sustainable if we have to reorder hundreds of cups and plates every few weeks. We specifically chose porcelain because you can use this product for several years with a little care. And if the cups and plates then

disappear everywhere, into the dormitories, into the offices, then of course this concept is massively disrupted.

What did we do? We tried to educate the students that it's actually not a big deal to bring the cups back after use. We don't mind if they take the cups or plates with them. But it would be nice if they brought them back to the centre. It is a huge effort for us if we have to walk through the university, through the lecture halls, through the offices, in order to collect our dishes in the presence of the university caretaker, because we are not allowed to do it alone.

Mang: So with what success? May I ask you some more questions? So these measures are having an effect? Has there already been an improvement?

Rolka: As far as I know, absolutely.

Mang: Yes, after all. Now let's talk a bit more about sustainability. That has already been mentioned a bit in relation to the product range. Sustainability, now more than ever, is on everyone's lips again. Especially in Tübingen, there are many student groups that are campaigning for the Studierendenwerk to operate more sustainably. What can you say to these students – how sustainable are the Studierendenwerk cafeterias?

Rolka: We try to be as sustainable as possible. Of course, it's always a difficult line to walk between offering something and being sustainable. The students still expect a certain offer towards the end of the opening hours. In the snack area, the ladies in the cafeterias produce on demand. So when they sell out, they produce more. Of course, this is also a way to ensure that as little as possible is left over at the end of the day. In other areas, for example with frozen goods, only as much is taken out as is roughly needed for the day. When it's sold out, you can take it out again and replenish it. And towards the end of the evening, remaining stocks that would otherwise have to be disposed of are usually sold at a lower price.

Mang: Well, a lot is definitely being done. But the fact is that despite all these efforts, for example, it was still common practice for a long time that some snacks had to be disposed of at the end of the day. Justifiably, this has repeatedly caused a lot of criticism. Now, at the beginning of the winter semester 2022/23, the Studierendenwerk has reacted and signed a cooperation agreement with the non-profit organisation foodsharing.

What can you tell us about this?

Rolka: Well, for one thing, the quantities we had to throw away in the evening were extremely small – compared to other restaurateurs. We tried to throw away as little as possible. That's because we adapted our production. What is left over can now be collected from the cafeterias by those who have registered with foodsharing. They can then either distribute it to other people, other institutions or use it for their own consumption.

Mang: Yes, that definitely sounds like an exciting co-operation, but that brings us to the end of our episode. There would certainly be much more to report from the cafeterias of the Studierendenwerk. If you have any further questions for Mr Rolka, please feel free to write to us on social media or by email. I hope we were able to show you that the cafeterias of the Studierendenwerk work with a lot of heart and soul and with a lot of sustainable commitment. I would like to thank Mr Rolka once again for his insights and hope to hear from you again soon. Take care! Ciao.

**Note: This transcription of the podcast was generated with the help of machine software. We apologise for any minor discrepancies or spelling mistakes.*