



# Science for the people

Ag léit i m



**Tuarascá**  
Pól Ó M  
Eagarthó

Tá an c  
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muis a  
Gaeilge ag ob  
scéim phíolót  
acht a choith  
fhreastalaíonn  
Ghaeilteacht.

Beidh Cois  
amháin saor  
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Choláiste Cha  
Beidh rogha é  
ar dhá leabha  
lín, *Cuarrteo*  
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Ghaeilge ma  
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á cothú i me

"Tá an ti  
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gadh den sórt  
léitheoiréach  
a chur chun c  
Tabharfar c



## The Alchemist Cafe grinds up dry theories and turns them into stimulating scientific conversation.

### Rosita Boland reports

The idea was to bring science into the pub," explains Judith Moffett (25), one of three scientists currently organising Dublin's monthly Alchemist Cafe meetings. If "science" and "the pub" are not subjects you would usually associate with each other, then you have a lot in common with a sizeable percentage of the population.

It was for this reason that Duncan Dallas, who had previously presented science-based television programmes, set up Britain's first Cafe Scientifique in 1998. It was in a wine bar in Leeds. There are now dozens of such cafes across Europe, North and South America, Australasia, India and parts of Africa. Britain alone now has 30 cafes, with new ones opening periodically.

The organisation's website explains that "Cafe Scientifique is a place where, for the price of a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, anyone can come to explore the latest ideas in science and technology. Meetings have taken place in cafes, bars, restaurants and even theatres, but always outside a traditional academic context... Cafe Scientifique is a forum for debating science issues, not a shop window for science. We are committed to promoting public engagement with science and to making science accountable."

At present, Ireland has two Cafe Scientifiques; one in Limerick and one in Dublin. The Dublin one has been running since July 2004, and is called the Alchemist Cafe. The opening discussion was entitled *Wireless Sensor Technology: Can Big Brother Be Good For Us?* and given by Dermot Diamond of Dublin City University (DCU). That one was held in the

ranged in a room off the Library Bar and the punters start arriving. There are never as many of them as the organisers would like: they are having trouble publicising the events since they don't have any funding, although a friend, Neasan O'Neill, updates the website.

Some 20 people eventually settle down to listen to Fallon speak. The idea at all cafes is to keep the talk to about 20 minutes, and then throw the topic open to discussion.

It is to Fallon's credit that he manages to speak about such a potentially off-putting subject as the parasitic worm and disease, and make us all (including me, who took no science subjects for Leaving Cert) both interested and engaged in what he says.

I learn, for instance, the rather grotesque fact that every one of us has, on average between 50 and 100 tiny worms inside us. But that's good news, because they help keep our immune systems in order.

"We see the worm as a drug cabinet," Fallon explains. He speaks for some time on how the presence of different parasites in our bodies can fight allergies, and how his research is focused in this area. And that Irish children rank a worrying fourth in the world when it comes to suffering from allergies.

## 'I think it's essential that scientists talk to the public'

I also learn that you can buy live tapeworms on the internet. They are bought, apparently, by overweight people who have the tapeworms in mind for a bit of internal spring-cleaning. Fallon even has some parasitic worms with him.

The three little bottles of (dead) schistosome worms, which are water-borne and carry bilharzia (an exceptionally nasty life-threatening parasitic disease), are examined and passed around just as the nibbles arrive. They're cocktail sausages, and piled up on plates they unfortunately

look rather similar to the invertebrates we've been talking about all evening. Fortunately enough, most of them remain un-eaten.

**ONCE FALLON'S TALK** is over, the questions begin.

"Why are animals always being wormed if it's good for you to have worms?" This, apparently, is because animals and humans have very different immune systems.

"What kind of worms do children pick up at school?" Pin worms, is the answer to that.

"It's understandable that some allergies have developed out of changing lifestyle, through eating processed food, and living in clean houses with central heating, but what about specific food allergies like peanut allergy? Where and how did that come about?"

I don't understand the answer to that question, but it's Fallon's only answer of the evening that I can't follow. Something to do with molecular structure - I think.

Of the 20 or so people present, only four of them have nothing to do with science, and two of those are Moffett's parents. The rest are either all studying the sciences or work in the field of science. It seems a real shame that there aren't more members of the general public attending, since the whole idea of the cafe is to attract a range of people.

"I think it's essential that scientists talk to the public," Fallon says, explaining why he was happy to come along and talk for free. "The days of scientists just talking to scientists are over. The public are interested now. And besides, a lot of research is paid for out of taxpayers' money, and the public are entitled to find out how their money is being spent."

◆ *The Alchemist Cafe's next event is on June 14th at 7.45pm in the Central Hotel. The topic is Cannabis - a Therapeutic or Drug of Abuse?* with *Dr Veronica Campbell from Trinity College's Institute of Neuroscience. See [www.cafescientifique.org](http://www.cafescientifique.org) and [www.alchemistcafe.cjb.net](http://www.alchemistcafe.cjb.net) for more details.*

anna a scriobair na de sheinn ar na daltaí a easanna is fea Lena chois chta ar fáil de leo sa rang. hocal bunaithe steanna sampla oibre don léinn Chomh ma leis na focal na daltaí a mDúirt Nic aon dalta n bionn am sa chúrsa agus faidh siad fa ann dóibh is briomn sé sear an scéim a le eile an bhliain

Beidh Eilín Ní Ghlinn fé cholaíste agus himeachtaí dailta, rud a bualadh le hBeidh muir crochadh pó eolas faoin s choláiste, M "Táimid Cois Life agus den scoth is scil an-ábhaigh achta i sealbh ag comhrá steachta, li agus scríbh chomh mó fáiltímid roib Tá Cois bliain ar an gclár comóir.

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# What helps the medicine go down?

Unfortunately these rows occur