

A photograph of a food service counter, likely in a university canteen. The counter is made of light-colored wood and has several trays of food. A prominent red circular sign with white text reads "STOP & enjoy URBANeat". The sign is slightly tilted. In the background, there are more trays and a person's hand is visible. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor setting with large windows.

# Lunch bunch

Lunch may be a fixture for caterers, but what customers seek out within it is far less dependable. Savoury standbys and homemade cheese and pickle sarnies have their staunch advocates, whilst thrill-seekers yearn for exotic street nosh: food with flair. Latching onto the latest trends – and offering adequate variety, whilst remaining on-budget – is key to upping the pace of the mid-day rush, and also to snaring straggling opt-outs. **Damon Jones** ponders what motivates students to turn at the culinary crossroads – and how universities can satiate their many-flavoured appetites.

Cut-throat businessfolk (well, Gordon Gekko in 1987's *Wall Street*, at least) slice their competition with the jibe that "lunch is for wimps". Food service operators, however, are shrewd enough to differ. Horizons, the sector analysts, predicted in September that there's copious profit to be found in a market which claims 35 per cent of the UK industry. Set to increase to 36 per cent by 2014, the firm's observers determined that

their custom, he reveals, a lunchtime 'meal deal' offer, centred around a sub-style roll with Yorkshire branding (provided by sandwich makers Tiffin) has been introduced, and recently supplemented with a higher priced pillow pack range. Freshly prepared baguettes have been notably favoured over the past few weeks, too – notching up sales of 300 units per day. This option has also been enhanced, with a more lavish 'gourmet-style' baguette (e.g. peppered roast beef, with watercress and

also whether a product enters their range of affordability. They like their choices to be quick – but also seem to know what they want before entering a restaurant or cafe." Lunchtime favourites on the campus vary from porridge to paninis, and embrace the recent fad for street food concepts. For those on tight budgets, there's a 'credit crunch' meal deal at £3.00, and also the incentive of loyalty cards and a 'bring your own mug' scheme, which offers an instant 10p discount on beverages. Munching along-



incentivising meal deals and discounts, alongside time constraints, deterred customers from preparing food at home, thus propelling them through front-of-house.

The culminative figures involved would enthruse the steeliest – or perhaps that's scaliest – of investors. 11 billion sandwiches are devoured by us per annum, according to the British Sandwich Association. And one-in-three of these are shop-purchased. Examining this one product type alone reveals a bonanza between the bread-cuts: a scrumptious four billion. It's no wonder that universities are hungry to learn just what it is that gets their youthful consumer base to step right up to their counter-tops.

Unfortunately, they don't hold a monopoly on this lucrative daily feast – and remaining profitable means keeping an eye on local rivals. "With the ever-increasing challenge from adjacent high street competition and the tough economics of our times, striking a balance between price point and quality is ever critical," explains Jon Broadhurst, Head of Catering at Sheffield Hallam University. "Without offering good value for money, our students will be happy to vote with their feet." To retain

horseradish) offering freshness and quality to more discerning clientele. Whilst salads are also in vogue, "the demand for hot lunches seems to have softened, though our newly introduced British dish of the day is starting to prove popular," reports the Head. "Our 'Fish Fryday' is now being joined by other promotions – 'Monday Roast' and 'Pie Tuesday'."

The myth of the cash-strapped student is challenged by this approach, which, targeting bargain hunters, also acknowledges a segment of more affluent buyers. It's an opinion shared by Jayne Seymour, General Manager of Hospitality Services at UWE in Bristol. "Students will always look at cost, but not necessarily select the cheapest option," she vouches. "It's

side the thrift-conscious however are overseas students, who bring expectations – and, happily, often the funding – to indulge in more spectacular offerings. "Theatre cooking is especially popular with our international student body," observes Seymour. "They're happy to wait for it to be prepared – even though it's set at a higher selling price."

These individual accounts are corroborated by joint research conducted by the NUS and retail brand URBAN eat in April 2012, which noted that, in order of priority, students' main concerns were quality – followed by price, convenience and health benefits. "There is a stereotypical view of university students living on baked beans and pizza, but the success of URBAN eat in this particular market has certainly proved otherwise. Students are pretty discerning customers," explains

the range's Brand Manager, Isla Biggin. Comprising of over a hundred different types of product choices, their extensive menu includes sandwiches, pastries and bagels, amongst other morsels. This year's intelligence operation has also resulted in a further



expansion – with seven new savoury pastries, hot wraps, olive pots and a Bircher Muesli breakfast introduced after receiving feedback from students.

For those with limited facilities or isolated sites, stocking a diverse range of pre-made products can help to ensure for customers that, “no matter what the budget, no two lunchtimes need to be the same,” emphasises Biggin. “Because URBAN eat is supported by a nationwide distribution network, it is able to make regular

comments Toby Hanbury, Managing Director of The Healthy Vending Company. Not only can it appeal to rushed consumers but, as it supplies, “a 24/7 option, when the lunch and dinner services aren’t available,” it can also help to secure custom outside traditional dining times. They may not be able to compete on equal terms with established premises which offer comfortable, sit-down meals, but are an apposite way of targeting lunchtime’s non-confirmist nibblers.

similar values. In this way, vending can also act as an indicator of current trends and areas for growth, since it’s easy for users to monitor exactly which edibles have dropped into students’ clutches. “These are products which you can’t purchase anywhere else on a university campus,” emphasises the Managing Director. “Vending is a very sensible solution to numerous issues, including cash or stock control. Also, it guarantees that businesses can turn over money throughout the week – including



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deliveries to all outlets to ensure they can always have a wide range of product on-shelf, and, at the same time, are able to minimise wastage.” Another benefit is that specialist products – such as gluten-free and halal offerings – can also be provided, without the need for additional sourcing or bespoke prep.

Currently supplying some 600 university outlets throughout the country, the brand has gained notable recognition, with some sites experiencing year-on-year growth of 30-35 per cent. A likely driver is an appealing student marketing strategy, which includes popular ‘win free fees’ promotions, opportunities to win round the world trips, and activities at fresher’s weeks. The favourable response has helped URBAN eat to amass a 13,000-strong following across social media platforms to date.

An option which may complement – or substitute for – cafeteria operations is a standalone vending unit. Instead of luring students onto the premises, these machines can be positioned at major junctions and thoroughfares. Whilst powerful branding can work wonders here their major enticement is instant, queue-less gratification. “Vending, in its purest form, is a convenience,”

Offering an edifying rebuttal to the calorie-laden merchandise so often proffered by vending stations, Hanbury’s business model displays a smörgåsbord of alternatives. Starting at 65p, product lines include rice crackers, granola bars and dried fruits. Rather than provide tokenistic ‘healthy’ items alongside the Mars bars, Healthy Vending’s approach is to stock 35 to 50 in one unit. “A company like ours believes a wide choice is the key to driving sales. As the manufacturers enlarge their ranges, we also benefit,” says Hanbury. Moreover, since it concentrates on a single, potent selling point, this stratagem makes each site a ‘go to’ destination for those who embrace

weekends and evenings. Options for cashless and card payment make this flexible and very easy to administer.”

Besides nutritional content, preparation and ingredients are also regularly subject to additional scrutiny by clients, who are often more food-aware. As indicated by URBAN eat’s investigations, the fetish for freshness is a significant consideration amongst the hungry hordes. To placate consumers wary of pre-packaged foods, or those keen to secure a bespoke fix, dishes which are cooked and assembled onsite – or in front of the buyer – can offer a lucrative solution. “Whilst the food-to-go categories are at the heart of lunchtime purchasing, freshly baked bread, cakes and sweet pastries are also important – not everyone is buying to ‘eat on the run’,” notes Stephen Clifford, Marketing Controller of Country Choice, a retail part of the Brake Bros food service group. “Back in the ‘70s Cup-a-Soup and Pot Noodle might have been acceptable, but nowadays freshness is a given, the norm, an expectation. This is a combination of consumers expecting higher standards, and retailers correspondingly stepping up to the mark.”

To capitalise on this perceived demand, Country Choice has provided outlets to a





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number of locations, including universities. Allowing caterers to prepare baguettes and crusty rolls in-store (rather than merely reheat them), the installations clearly display ovens and work areas to highlight this facet of operations. “This setup gives consumers the opportunity to have a sandwich exactly how they want it, and of course it provides the caterer with an opportunity to demonstrate heightened customer service, as well as giving them a point of difference,” relates Clifford. Another trading style supported by the firm provides reheated ‘Food to Go’ (FTG) comestibles, which are offered on a self-service basis, and can be stored for 2-4 hours without impairing quality. Within this configuration, savouries, pastries and burgers, as one might anticipate, stand out as best sellers. Country Choice’s latest, Italian-accented venture is again oriented toward freshness – and boldly aims to help retailers achieve profit margins in excess of 60 per cent. Dubbed ‘Pasta Pronto’, this in-house ‘to go’ business is supported by units which store pre-cooked pasta, reheating them on demand, in portion-controlled baskets. These can either be operated as free-standing or counter-top units and, with a choice of 21 sauces, are comprehensively supplied with all the necessary raw materials, branded cups and utensils to users.

Of course, as impatient as diners are for their dinners, caterers are keen to maximise revenue. Citing a recent FTG outpost unveiled within a Costcutter store at the University of Warwick in 2010, the Controller testifies that year-on-year sales are up by 20 per cent. Satisfying cravings for hot food, Country Choice’s schemes minimise labour requirements, whilst tactically placing their wares on sale throughout the day. A filled baguette programme offered by the firm works in this mode – displaying products in self-service, chilled units, which are regularly replenished to meet peaks and troughs in demand. “The concept is perfectly suited to universities,” muses Clifford, “because students tend to ‘graze’ throughout the day, making it vital to have comprehensive availability,” without, which he warns, all the strenuous legwork undertaken by caterers may be in vain. “For more than half of the year, students are part of the mainstream population, and are therefore familiar with all the high street food outlets – not just their offers, but also the marketing and branding.” Unless universities can match, or trump sector-wide trends, the risk is that students will veer off campus – and, step-by-step, run revenue streams into the ground. ●