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FOOD RETAILERS - CATERING FOR ALL TASTES

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FOOD RETAILERS - CATERING FOR ALL TASTES

I would like to begin by putting forward a seemingly contentious hypothesis. That is, that home cooking is fast becoming a thing of the past, a quaint, old fashioned eccentricity.

Such a vision of the future may, at first, appear ridiculous, particularly to those who enjoy a good two-course dinner with their family each evening after a hard day at work.

Although those of you directly involved in the catering business will no doubt find those occasions few and far between!

But there are now signs that just such a revolution is under way and the implications for caterers and food retailers are immense.

Here, I suppose, I ought to show my true colours. Asda, as well as being amongst the largest food retailers in the UK, has a substantial interest in catering.

With 131 in-store catering outlets, not to mention facilities to feed 70,000 staff members in 250 stores we can be said to have a foot in both camps.

Not that the time has yet come when people visit ASDA to eat rather than shop! But with an annual turnover of more than £30m our cafes and restaurants are large business operations in their own right.

To return to my hypothesis. The British are notoriously conservative about food and eating habits, but even the most casual observer would confirm that there has been a major shift in food preferences and basic attitudes to eating in recent years.

Increased affluence, foreign travel, working Mums, and the trend towards more fashionable lifestyles has changed eating outside the home from a rarity to an accepted part of everyday life

The variety and range of catering outlets in the UK now, compared with 10 or 15 years ago, is remarkable and it seems new concepts and 'themed' restaurants are arriving daily.

Despite the current squeeze on disposable income, it remains a fact that while the percentage of household income spent on food to eat at home continues to fall, that spent on meals outside the home is rising.

So what of the food brought back to eat at home? Has that changed along with the trend to eat out? The answer to that must be a firm Yes!

The most obvious impact on food retailing of the move away from home-cooking, is the rise in sales of convenience foods and ready meals.

This is the most buoyant sector of the food market. Market data suggests it is growing at a rate of between 15 and 30 per cent a year and we see no reason why this will not continue for some time to come.

Before I take a closer look at the various convenience foods available, I'd like to concentrate on the underlying trends behind this new phenomenon, many of which, as you will see, underpin the changes in catering also.

The notion of convenience has become increasingly influential in many aspects of spending patterns.

With more money to spend on non-essentials, even in a recession, people have adjusted their expectations and value judgements away from the utilitarian attitudes of the post war years to the leisure and fashion- dominated lifestyles of the 1980's and 90's.

Within this lifestyle revolution, the food industry has responded quickly with innovative new products and meal options. The public have been a little slower to accept these, however.

The kitchen has received its share of mechanisation and new design, but the task of preparing food for the family generally remains one of the most time consuming and tedious chores for the busy and, often, working house wife.

As the 'Birds Eye' Menu Masters and Findus Lean Cuisine advertising highlighted - much of the appeal of the ready meal is the freedom it gives the consumer from food preparation - in the same way as eating out does.

It would be outlandish, for instance, to refer to 'convenience clothing' and yet is is accepted that the vast majority of clothing is bought in the final stage of processing from raw materials to finished garment.

Pre-processing in the food industry is only now beginning to enter this final stage of maturity when the housewife will purchase from a store a completely prepared meal which requires nothing more than unwrapping and, usually, re-heating before it is ready for consumption.

It may even be packed in a table ready container, which is thrown away after use rather than washed up, so long as the packaging used is as environment-friendly as possible.

Many convenience foods have been developed over the years which ease the housewife's burden, in relation to storage of food, economy and preparation.

The can of soup, or beans, fruit cocktail even tomato ketchup all fall into the category of convenience foods. I know our recipe books at home give instructions on how to create all of these from the raw ingredients, but I don't suppose any but the hardened cookery enthusiast is likely to go to the trouble on a daily basis.

Already the share of individual food spending on convenience products is high, at around 30%, but spending on convenience meals is now only beginning to take off.

At this juncture it may be of help if I try to define what is a ready , or convenience meal.

A fine definition of a ready meal would be one which contains a meat, fish or vegetable main meal complete with carbohydrate accompaniment. It may be frozen, chilled, canned or ambient.

The term convenience food or meal covers a far wider range of products including those which do not constitute a complete meal.

The frozen food industry has devised the term 'meal centre' for this kind of part convenience meal which the consumer is intended to use along with other accompaniments.

Ready meal sales are a long way from matching spending on take away food or restaurant meals but they are increasing fast and forecast to reach over £1 billion by 1994.

Buying a ready meal cooked and presented, rather than the ingredients to cook at home, is nothing new, just think of fish and chips. The long history of the catering industry is proof of that. what is new is the purchase of a meal from a supermarket.

The advantages seem obvious. The first is the convenience of having a ready meal in the deep freeze, larder of fridge when you need it. No need to leave home to visit a restaurant or take-away.

Then there is the perception of freshness and quality. A boxed, chilled Chicken Tikka dish may not taste quite like that provided by the local Indian take-away but ..... and here I don't want to cast unwarranted aspersions .....it may well be seen as less likely to cause an attack of 'Delhi Belly' as the latter.

We take considerable care to ensure that the very highest standards of hygiene and safety are applied to Asda chilled products.

We have recently spent more than £10m on updating our in-store chilled and refrigeration units in line with food hygiene regulations.

One of the primary concerns of the Asda technical and development centre is quality assurance from conception to consumption.

We are currently investing a temperature and time indicator for chilled foods which will show consumers if a product has been mishandled to such a degree as to make it unsafe.

Freshness has long been a high priority with the shopper, frozen food is, rightly, considered safe and convenient, but it is chilled food which scores as being seen by the housewife as the least processed, second only to fresh fruit and vegetables.

The chilled cabinet projects a very high image of freshness to a housewife increasingly interested in serving good quality unprocessed food to the family.

The trend towards healthy eating has also been a major engine of growth in the chilled cabinet. The average Asda store now has 350 per cent more chilled space tha 10 years ago.

The interest in lower fat, less sugar, high fibre and additive free food has been used to develop a whole range of chilled foods.

Here too the Asda technical centre has been at the fore in analysing the nutritional value of the foods we sell along side their visual appeal and tastiness.

And this has been reflected in the Asda in-store cafes and restaurants.

These outlets could best be described as 'middle of the road'. They cater for a wide range of customers and are designed to offer value for money, tasty and consistently high quality meals and snacks for shoppers.

From what I've just said you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a chips with everything operation designed to keep people moving to maximise turnover per square metre!

Well, yes, chips do figure in some of our restaurants, they remain as popular as ever, but you'll also find Quorn main meals, jacket potatoes, salads, skimmed milk, yoghurt, cottage cheese, fresh fruit, vegetarian dishes, even mineral water based fruit drinks.

And in our latest concept - Cafe Asda - no chips are served.

Out of interest, Quorn was available in the Asda cafes before it appeared on the retail shelves. The Asda Quorn pies are Super Marketing Quality Food Award winners for 1991.

We're not trying to convert the people who use our cafes to a healthy diet, we're responding to their demands for such, in exactly the same way as we respond to demands for convenience meals.

Where there is an overlap between the Asda catering outlets and the superstores is in provision for the family!

A visit to the supermarket is, often, a family activity, so it follows that eating at Asda is the same.

Yet the trends within the family which are leading to the increase of ready meals is somewhat different.

Recent surveys by Mintel, and I apologise here to our colleagues from Euromonitor and Marketpower, only 61% of housewives said their family eat together every weekday, 10% said they rarely ate together, and 17% said everyone in the household looked after their own eating arrangements.

Pity the poor housewife trying to cope with this running meal each evening, especially if she's been working all day! No wonder the appeal of convenience foods is increasing!

To redress the balance of sexism in much of what I've said so far. It is also worth noting that in 1990, in America, according to research by McCann Erickson, Europe, an estimated 40% of grocery shoppers were men, 52% of teenage girls and 26% of teenage boys regularly did the family's grocery shopping, usually to help working mums.

Whether the same pattern repeats itself here remains to be seen, but I, for one, would not like to wager too much that it will not.

The family, and its children, does exact a strong influence on the type of ready meals now available.

In the early days these high value-added products were targeted at the affluent, young singles or newly wed market, the YUPPIES and DINKEYS, as I believe they were referred to.

The assumption was that these high spending, fast living individuals would see the advantages of the ready meal more readily that the rest of us.

However, this is now changing. Convenience foods specifically for children are now commonplace as are those for the family. No longer a rare treat, more an everyday necessity. I seem to recognise that concept in relation to catering!

Balancing this is the change in so called 'normal eating' among the British, helped to a large degree by the variety of foods offered by the country's caterers.

For many years, governments social surveys regularly reported that the favourite meal of people in Britain consisted of tomato soup, roast meat, plus potatoes and two other vegetables (sometimes alternating with fish and chips), plus a pudding or tinned fruit.

While much of this menu may still make mouths water, there is no doubt that there is now far greater experimentation, thanks to the wider choice available.

People are eating less formally but more adventurously. As a result of the many upheavals in our lifestyle, notably working housewives and less regular mealtimes, consumers have taken to finding a new repertoire of food.

The working mother may only find time to indulge in home-based haute cuisine as a leisure pursuit or for special occasions but the advent and acceptance of ready prepared meals of the kind previously only available in restaurants provides the opportunity to eat ethnic and exotic meals at any time.

That is where the superstore is, now more that ever before, in competition with the catering industry.

We compete, quite obviously as caterers in our own right providing both impulse and planned eating out for our shoppers, while at the same time selling ready meals and convenience foods which can replace impetus to eat out or buy a take-away.

We do this not as a conscious effort to compete with the catering sector, it is in effect almost a by-product of our response to the changing demands of our customers.

Convenience foods began in the can, they moved on to the freezer and the chilled cabinet and are now returning to the shelf in the form of pasteurised ambient products.

At the same time the other products on offer have also been changing too.

While around 3% of British housewives (there's those Mintel figures again) may buy a complete Indian Meal once a month, 10% will buy the ingredients and fresh items needed to make the same dish, during the same period.

People still enjoy cooking, just as they still enjoy going out for a meal. And while they continue to cook the vast majority of Asda's business will be concerned with providing the raw or semi processed ingredients they require to feed their family.

Fresh foods are perceived as being of a higher standard. But alongside the trend towards healthier eating, however, is a trend to eat indulgently, particularly at the weekend, almost as a reward for eating sensibly during the week.

In general the consumer is increasingly concerned with a well-balanced diet, which can integrate a basically healthy food intake with a splash of gourmet indulgence on special occasions.

The McCann-Erickson Europe report, I mentioned earlier, on the US food market underlined this trend among American consumers and predicted that this would become increasingly influential in Britain.

This type of consumer was neither a fast-food junkie nor a health food hysteric. At the same time as the health food market is expected to continue to grow so will the market for more indulgent foods, be they convenient or not.

Yams, squashes, chillies and okra may now stand shoulder to shoulder with the traditional cabbage, carrot, swede and potato in the fresh produce section, for as long as the demand remains for them.

What concerns Asda is provision of choice. Our research, like that of our competitors shows that shoppers put choice and product range above price quite often when choosing which supermarket to visit.

It is assumed that prices will generally vary little between the big players, rightly or wrongly, but CHOICE is the key to success.

That's our business, and we're expanding the choices available in-store all the time.

The expansion and development of the ASDA catering outlets is a case in point. We now intend that all new and revamped stores should include eating facilities as part of the "all under one roof " philosophy of Asda which has seen the expansion of the household and leisure sector and introduction of the George designer clothing range.

Our catering facilities are constantly evolving. We're now moving into areas such as children's parties and special events, in response to customers demands.

We have a range of facilities from our large Green Tables restaurants

To our latest development - Cafe Asda

Choice is what its all about.

Whether you want to shop daily, weekly or monthly, to buy fresh and specialist ingredients to create your own dishes, to buy a ready meal, or eat while your in the store.

Asda will provide the choice to cater for all tastes.

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