

Organic growth

Organic sandwiches look set for a bright future, along with the growth of the sector in general. The rising star appears to be Fresh! naturally Organic, an organic producer of sandwiches and salads with UK certification. Food consultant Nellie Nichols paid the company a visit



STOP PRESS

AS WE WENT TO PRESS, FRESH! NATURALLY ORGANIC HAD, AMAZINGLY RELOCATED TO A NEW UNIT IN NEARBY WEMBLY WITHIN DAYS OF A SERIOUS FIRE. IT'S BUSINESS AS USUAL FOR THE COMPANY.

I'm not surprised that over the last ten years sales of organic food in the UK have increased ten fold from just over £100 million in 1994 to £1.12 billion in 2004. Growing at £2 million a week, the rate of growth is twice the rate of the general grocery market.

Sales through box schemes, farmer's markets and farm shops have grown faster than any other retail outlet at 16%. Maybe these are some of the reasons. The Grocer in May this year reported that according to Hine Cognacs, organic food now ranks higher than plasma screens, handheld computers and flip top 3G mobile phones as the must have accessory for young people. The research into more than 1,000 young people's spending habits shows that 40% of 16 to 24 year olds see such food as their ultimate indulgence, above hi-tech gadgets.

Containing higher levels of Vitamin C and essential minerals, organic foods contain no additives which can cause a variety of health problems such as heart disease and hyperactivity in children. Coupled together with a severe restriction on over 400 chemical pesticides and fertilisers routinely used in conventional farming, (which frequently leave residues) the use of antibiotics on organic farm animals is prohibited and the highest standards of animal welfare are applied. There are no hidden costs. Compare this with the £120 million that tax payers fork out to pay for chemicals to be removed from drinking water, mainly as a result of the pesticides used in farming. Organic food comes from trusted sources. All farms and food companies are

frequently inspected, invariably with no prior warning. Traceability is gone through with a tooth comb. There are undoubtedly huge additional benefits for wildlife and the environment. And organic food tastes better.



CHANTELLE LUDSKI



So where can I buy an organic sandwich and who produces them? Fresh Organics is a small compact family run 1,800 sq ft manufacturing site based in Acton, London. It is the only solely organic producer of sandwiches and salads with organic certification in the UK. When ever possible, ingredients are sourced in Britain. They are of the highest possible organic quality or they just aren't used.

Scrawled across the information board is written "Procrastination is the enemy of achievement". I'm sitting in the very small and immensely busy open plan office opposite the founder, Chantelle Ludski. Recently described by The Observer as the next Anita Roddick, this personable and charming South African runs a tight, efficient, happy ship and cares stoically for her business and her staff of 45. In 1999, with a



golden business career ahead of her, she gave it all up by starting Fresh!, the UK's first organic café while she was still at business school. This was closely followed further units in Chiswick, Oxford Circus and Selfridges. Three years ago she moved completely out of retail into manufacture and has experienced a staggering 194% growth since and never looked back.

Supplying Sainsbury's, Boots, and Tesco, leading organic supermarkets Planet Organic and Fresh and Wild, Chantelle is clearly on to a winner. Secretly I was rather dreading what I was only assuming were going to be dull and worthy products, especially when I realised that they are also providing for Vegetarian, Vegan, Wheat Free, Gluten Free and Dairy Free. I was, however, amazed at the wealth of choice she offers on a six day a week delivery throughout the UK, on a made to order/just in time basis.

There are Gourmet and Everyday sandwiches, baguettes, wraps, and salads with a huge selection to choose from across meat, poultry, fish, vegetarian and vegan. Every single product is made by hand. The names are often cheesy, (Italian Bird, Spicy Chick, Get my Goat, Greek Holiday to thankfully name only a few) but memorable, and the products invariably eat well.

The New York Turkey Club on exceptionally thick soft Wholemeal was delicious, as was Ham It Up, simple wonderful dry flavoursome organic ham just with grain mustard and salad. Their top seller, interestingly enough, is a No Mayo, Vegan creation I thought I was going to regret deeply but was very surprised by, called Bugsy - Grated Carrot, Humous, Watercress and Alfalfa Sprouts. The best, though, was a sandwich of the month called Crunch Time - Turkey with crunchy salad, mayo, fresh peppers, celery and cucumber. It made you feel bouncier and healthier just to eat it.

The salads again cover the length and breadth of choice with different Pastas, Egg Noodles, Rice Noodles, Cous Cous, Satay Chicken, Chicken Tikka,

the list goes on. The best seller calls itself Magic Mushrooms with Grilled Field Mushrooms, Sesame Egg Noodles, Tofu, Hoi-Sin and Broccoli. Remember every intricate ingredient is organic.

There is a wealth of fascinating ingredients: Raw Beetroot, Five Spice Chicken, Mung Bean Sprouts, Tarragon Mustard, Olive Tapenade, to name but a few. I was aware of the effervescency in the on going quest for new ideas and products. The in house printing of labels insures that the range never disappoints and offers flexibility if the supply of any organic produce ingredient is interrupted for any reason.

With its own production kitchen for the preparation of components, fresh really does mean fresh. From the grated carrot and the cooked noodles to the roast veg, everything is done in-house. Encouraging customer feedback through the Sandwich Hall of Fame on her website, Chantelle constantly involves customers in the evolution of new products, which are then rigorously tested and discussed with her staff. Feedback is asked for and frequently provided and the website is a constant source of information on the prolific range of products available.

Most importantly, Chantelle does not preach the organic word. Her philosophy is refreshingly straight forward, honest and modest. She doesn't do quotes. Ask her why organic and she'll tell you that she's not saying people must eat organic, merely that there should be more information available for consumers to be able to make an informed choice. That food just being organic isn't good enough, that development is vital and all her combinations and recipes have to taste good as well. Oh, there was something she said: it was that she thinks she makes nice sandwiches most of the time. I think that's just a bit of an under-estimation myself.

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