

NELLIE NICHOLS

Deliciously naked

Stacks of sandwich products are starting to pop up on counters in London, celebrating the crispiness of the baguette, while still working within the four-hour ambient display rule. One of the best examples is Fernandez & Wells. Nellie Nichols joined the snaking queue of customers

I seriously think we're all in danger of becoming too clean.

The indoctrination begins from an early age of the importance of protection against the deadliness of germs and dirt.

Serious diseases such as MRSA apart, and I'm not suggesting for a moment we should all stop washing our hands, the goal posts for being sensible seem to have moved by epic proportions.

But the reality is that there are actually more than six hundred thousand bacteria living on every square inch of our skin.

There are more microbes on a person's body than there are humans on earth. Yet despite being responsible for some of the deadliest diseases on

earth, bacteria perform the most important roles in maintaining life on this planet.

As far as food safety goes, none of us would entertain the thought of being able to survive without a fridge. I remember the house that my parents originally moved to in Sussex in the 1960's, which had a rather impressive walk-in larder which happily served as a fridge for many years. The window, when opened, had a beautifully designed, tightly woven confessional box gauze metal cover, which stopped the flies making an uninvited entrance.

My mother then ensured each and every shelf was a wonder of deliciousness throughout the summer months and never, in all the years we lived there, did anything that came out



of that larder make anyone in the slightest bit ill.

Now don't get me wrong, Food Safety is a very serious matter indeed, but one does have to wonder how so many countries throughout Europe and the rest of the world manage to get by without quite so much of it when it comes to how food is stored and cooked.

Historically, and through culture and choice, different countries eat foods in so many different ways we find unacceptable. Recently in Tokyo I was taken to a famous restaurant whose menu specialises in all things originating from a chicken. We had to wait for a ridiculous time for a table, the queue was so long.

Chicken sashimi

One of the courses was chicken sashimi, paper-thin slices of raw chicken. My Japanese host, amused by my surprise, pointed out that no restaurant as great as this was going to risk its reputation by serving anything that could potentially harm its customers – and I realised it was my stigma that was the issue.





We have simply become far too over cautious as we are indoctrinated by the press who continue to feed us over sensationalised stories of the dangers of the popular foods that now make up our Western diet.

So let's face it, it's been very easy to forget what beautiful mountainous displays of delicious food can look like – the sheer decadence of ingredients simply spilling out of lovely bread without any of the constraints of packaging.

4hr ambient food display rule

Yet here we are, with the penny only finally dropping as to how we are systematically destroying the planet with amongst other things, our abundant overuse of plastic. But at last there is very visible evidence that more and more high street outlets are taking their right and proper advantage of the 4hr ambient food display rule.

Stacks of sandwich products are popping up on counters all over the place and the crispness of the baguette is suddenly as real in London as it's been since bread baking first began in Paris.

We no longer have to suffer the pulling of our teeth as we try and rip mouthfuls of resistant elasticity, better known by its more common name: the chilled baguette.

In the heart of Soho is probably the best example I have found of this new movement. Fernandez & Wells was started by Rick Wells, an ex-BBC correspondent and George Fernandez of the Monmouth Coffee Company, early in 2007 in Lexington Street, closely followed a few months later by another store a stone's throw round the corner in Beak Street.

Utilising their joint passions for architecture, unrivalled coffee and exquisite food, their aim is to create what they describe as a European market stall in an English setting.

Rick has an architectural eye, contributing to the detail which gives a remarkable overall effect of simplicity, warmth, immense style and understatement.

York stone, identical to the Lexington Street pavement outside, is used within the shop, giving the feel of continuation of the street, with wood used for the counter.

In the Beak Street shop these two elements are cleverly reversed. Copper garden taps have been adapted to fit the ceramic square sinks and a factory in France has made the simply welded together chrome stools that are a copy of one originally found in a French scrap yard. Whole delicious Spanish hams dangle enticingly in the window.

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Pied Piper effect

In both stores the focus is on the lusciousness of the food and the counters are covered with it. The visual power of this has a mesmerising Pied Piper effect – with my own ears I hear two passers by exclaiming ‘wow’ when they look in the doorway on passing and come straight in.

Piles of their Bocadillo sandwiches, made with traditionally French stone baked baguettes, are filled with 24-month cured ‘Le Noir de Bigorre’ Jamon and Plum Tomatoes (£4.50), Buffalo Mozzarella with Rocket and Plum Tomatoes (£5.50) or Spicy Italian Salami with Comte Cheese (£4.50).

A range of Ciabatta buns made with Olive Oil and dusted with Semolina are filled with Grilled Chorizo, Roasted Red Peppers and Rocket (£4.80); Free Range Dorset Ham with Montgomery Cheddar and Piccalilli (£4.80) or Prosciutto ‘Nationale’.

Then there is a focaccia filled with roast pork, rocket and olive oil, or Salami, Mortadella, Aioli, Rocket and Shaved Organic Parmesan (£5.00) –



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these prices are far from cheap but the sandwiches are enormously generous and there is a daily snaking queue of customers who simply can't get enough of them.

Daily changing salads

Behind the sandwiches in the Lexington Street store are the daily changing salads, Vesuvius like in vast dishes – take your pick at £1.60 per 100g. I loved the rocket, watercress, grilled sweet potato and toasted hazelnuts, and the tuna with massive chunks of Italian tomatoes and Salsa Verde.

Freshly made polenta, covered in tiny grilled fresh button mushrooms, is being given as a taster to waiting customers who are encouraged to try a new recipe.

There are freshly made soups which come with a simple white napkin folded around a spoon and slice of delicious Pollaine bread, as well as three fantastic quiches that change every day.

Selection of cheeses and meats

You can buy a large selection of cheeses and meats on their own or to go with a glass of the carefully selected wines Rick imports from all over Europe. In the evenings add a little plate of tapas and sit and relax. The only thing missing I can think of are a couple of robust dry Spanish Sherris, but he's already working on that.

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The Beak Street shop is far more of a coffee shop and has the addition of some wonderful cakes, again higgledy piggledy covering the counter, these are made by the marvellous Melrose in Primrose Hill especially for them, including a decadent Victoria Sponge, baby Portugese tarts, and some big fat oat and pecan biscuits.

To go with one of these, Jack, who is in charge of coffee, will make you the most awesome cup. All day long he tends and tweaks his machine, endlessly tasting and calibrating as he goes. He is not a Barista Rick tells me, just a coffee geek who comes from the Monmouth Coffee Company and therefore stands to understand coffee far more than most. Here coffee is made with love.

I am so impressed at how delicious and simple this food is – who said it's easy when you know how – but make no mistake, there are no secrets here, just a total lack of compromise.

I know this is real food; not all of us perhaps have access to it, but it's so incredibly important to know it's there when we want it - like the food

market in Barcelona, the ones all over Umbria and, closer to home, our own Borough Market.

The Slow Food Movement

Fernandez and Wells are inspired by the growth of farmer's markets and The Slow Food Movement. Their aim is to provide freshly made well-sourced food in a space that is uncluttered, where the smell is right and the service is friendly.

Rick says he won't have soft squidgy sofas and everyone sitting on them for hours. This is a relaxed but vibrant and happening place to have a coffee and a chat or read a paper and then move on.

Will he open a chain I'm dying to find out? His look is a little perplexed as if I've asked him something slightly inconceivable. It would depend on the building he says. It's like buying a house - it needs to feel absolutely right.

He doesn't want to create a brand with a standard design template and reproduce it without architectural character all over the UK. He doesn't appear to be in a hurry and that, along with his food, is one of the most refreshing things I've come across in a very long time.

Sometimes it's good to take things slowly.

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The above is based on her independent views